撫物語 ナデモノガタリ

The girl who was once a god, Nadeko Sengoku. She, who followed her dreams and was forced into reality, is successful in creating an alter ego by borrowing the power of the little girl shikigami, Yotsugi Ononoki.

However, the four "Nadekos" run away, scattered……?

The Oddities! Oddities! Oddities! of these modern days.

Youth is being unable to control even oneself.

NISIOISIN
NADEMONOGATARI
NADEMONOGATARI
CARESS TALE
NISIOISIN

撫物語
ナデモノガタリ

第零話　なでこドロー

ILLUSTRATION
VOFAN

001

If the life of Sengoku Nadeko were a comic serial, I would probably think 'that's some inconsistent protagonist' if I read all fifteen volumes at once.

Volume four had nothing to do with volume eight, her goals shift in god-knows-when, there exists no consistency in the narration, whether it is in first- or third-person, the styling changes all the time, no catchphrases, no regular hobbies, and last but not least, not even a fixed crush; those probably all change depending on the situation.

Such is the fate long-running series and their fans resign themselves to, or perhaps these are contradictions they revel in. But as a reader, I do not find every bit of it acceptable. So, in a certain way, if an author were to end a series before its characters go all off, it is something I can respect.

No, not 'as a reader'. Sengoku Nadeko is not some other girl, she's *me*. But it is also because of that I feel like I am someone different through different points in time. Me during then, me at that moment, me during that age, me in that era… I have never thought of them as the same person.

No matter what.

Like a mirage, it all looks unsteady.

Even in moments of self-reflection, that plain irresponsible thought of 'but was that

really me?' would sometimes pop up. For a girl as hapless as I to have committed that heinous transgression is, in a sense, beyond my imagination.

Those acts were clearly beyond me.

But of course, it is all escapism, isn't it.

Escapism at a hefty price, isn't it.

An immoral, irresponsible act.

Maybe by treating past me as different from current me I am protecting myself, but in the end, it just means I cannot look myself straight in the eye. If I am treasuring current me, then I have to treasure past me in that same way — at least that is what I currently think.

The point is, when talking about how my character went off, it is unfair to only blame the sheer length of a human lifespan, or that it was a long-running series.

Surely there are inconsistencies within a single volume, of what I say and what I do. Smooth-talking someone there, smooth-talking someone here, trying to then thread everything together — but then conflicts arise. Then the lying begins, going from one episode to the next.

People call it 'being adaptable', 'being versatile'.

To put it more sinisterly, 'acting cute'.

Even without going off, to have such an irritable main character, I can understand why people would support kicking them out. It is a curse — which, in retrospect, had an inevitability to it.

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An inevitable curse.

Which is probably another way of escaping it. Whether I am the one being cursed, or the one doing the cursing, it is all current me from afar.

From afar. Or from right next to me.

Maybe there was no change, no growth.

But I still cannot see past me like I see myself in the mirror. I also do not think I am that different alone than when I am with people.

Me, me, me.

Like multiple personalities.

No, I do not even know if I have as grandiose a thing as a 'personality', let alone a 'multiple' of them. It is probably difficult to find someone like me who doesn't deserve one.

My, my.

Speaking of going off-character, a recent friend, Ononoki Yotsugi, the professional, is an expert in all this.

The doll — Ononoki Yotsugi.

She is a humanoid oddity, a puppet oddity. Easily changed by her surroundings, adapting her personality with whoever is beside her — that seems to be her true essence.

She won't be appearing in a manga anytime soon.

People would have doubts about the author.

Which was not something she would mind, but she did say this back at that time.

And when I say ‘that time’, I of course meant the time she went off-character.

‘I think it’d be weirder if someone kept the same personality no matter when it was, where they were, or who they’re with. They’d be wanted dead, treated as some dangerous entity. All people, and even gods, will have good moods and bad moods — if they aren’t in good shape, maybe they’ll be ruder; if they were awakened by a phone call, then they’d be less attentive or enthusiastic. Maybe their condition swings depending on if it rains or shines. Maybe they’ll be forgiving of the most horrific sin imaginable when a grandchild is born. Maybe they’ll want to compensate or repent for an error they’ve made. Everybody has emotions of their own, and even if not, they have situations they find themselves in; you can’t just go through life without bobbing up and down — more than that, it’s mutual, too. If those on the receiving end weren’t listening in the first place, then any wisdom on one end would end up a wisecrack on the other. It’s not something you can get around, either; no excuses around this. It’s a fact of life we have to shoulder.’

‘We’, said the girl, the oddity; maybe current me is not so much of a human after all.

Not a surprise, really.

I say flippantly that my life is a serial, but even as I turn fifteen, it is a life that could not even make its way as a one-off. Shelved

proposals littered one after the other, even today.

That was me then.

That was me at that moment.

That was me during that age.

That was me in that era.

That is me now — someone unaware, who knows no beginning, who knows no finale, the one and only Sengoku Nadeko.

002

‘Look o————or not!’

Stepping into unfamiliar, outside realms, I thoughtlessly darted out of a corner, and right as I was about to get hit by a bike, its brakes screeched, consequently sending its rear tire soaring. No, ‘soaring’ is probably an exaggeration — ‘lifting up’, that looks better. Like a thrilling circus show, the metal bike almost grazed my head — if my hair was like back then, it would get pulled off, probably.

A moment of life or death…?

An escape by a hair’s breadth.

Except I was the only one who escaped by a hair’s breadth. For the bike that dodged me with the move of a stuntman, it did not end well.

It was a crash.

The landing failed, and like an air hockey puck, it swished across the tarmac, ending with a dramatic thud on the guardrail.

Dramatic indeed. A ferocious crash.

As this unexpected horrific accident unfolded, I got a feeling of déjà vu.

I have seen this somewhere before.

A near-identical accident, at the same place; I think it was somewhere around the end of last October…

My recollections aside, the cyclist who smashed onto the guardrail without protective gear — well, well, look who’s here.

Yes.

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It's Oshino Ougi-san.

'A-are you hurt?'

I asked, throwing everything aside and rushing towards there — although the exact same thing has happened before, there is no guarantee that Ougi-san would not be hurt. Or should I say, it should have hurt last time, too.

It looks like I will have to call an ambulance. I don't have a mobile phone, so it looks like I have to borrow Ougi-san's phone — it's stuffed somewhere in the pocket of the gakuran, right?

Mm? Hold on? Wait, what?

A gakuran? A male school uniform?

'All good!'

As I squatted next to Ougi-san, he sprang (as expected?) and sat up like a wind-up toy.

Wearing a flat grin.

It is important to worry and check, but the result was within my expectations, so I was not all surprised.

'Aah, pleasure to meet you, Sengoku-chan! My name is Oshino Ougi!'

'…We've met before.'

Rapid-fire dialogue seems off right after an accident; my unease showed (by the way, I have not had a chance to talk with any living person for a long time — except Ononoki-chan or Tsukihi-chan. Although calling those two 'living persons' would be a bit of a stretch), but I remained assertive.

Assertiveness is important.

That said, to be forgotten by a previous acquaintance, to get the first greeting treatment, seems lonesome… hm? Huh, thinking about it, was it not the other way around? I was unfamiliar with Ougi-san, but Ougi-san was familiar with me…

'I don't know anything — you're the one who knows, Sengoku-chan.'

'……'

'Nono, I'm not some forgetful detective — I've changed my colours, after all. Ha-ha, for current me, I *am* meeting Sengoku-chan for the first time.'

Ougi-san stood up, patting away the dirt on his gakuran — and it was a gakuran.

He cannot be anything other than a boy.

Mm hmm, indeed. Oshino Ougi-san, second year male student at Naoetsu High School — that's definitely it.

I know this.

Oshino Ougi.

The nephew of the oddities specialist, Oshino Meme-san — that was what he looked like from last year's near miss.

That is how I remember it. …It must be so.

With that said, I still don't know why Ougi-san is pretending to meet me for the first time; well, I'll let things slide for now.

It's not like I have the time for it.

I don't have time. Not nearly enough.

There was just cause as to why I thoughtlessly darted out of the corner, why I darted out of my room.

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'I should be the one asking if *you're* hurt, Sengoku-chan.'

'Ah, no… I'm fine, Ougi-san.'

'Ha-ha. Calling me "Ougi-san" like I'm a stranger — it's alright if you get closer, you can even call me "Ougi-onii-chan" and I wouldn't mind.'

Ha-ha.

If there is a middle school girl who calls a high school boy 'onii-chan' on their 'first meeting', I would like to meet her.

'Eh? But I thought that's what you called blah-di-blah-di-senpai?'

'……'

'Sorry, a slip of the tongue — just joshing. So, Sengoku-chan. Off to school?'

I appreciate him changing the subject, but to ask something with a smile whilst looking like he knows everything makes me a tad uncomfortable.

To put it more directly, it makes me unhappy.

The new topic was not sunshine and rainbows either.

Because I have been absent from school for over half a year.

Besides, I was not in uniform, but in a sweatshirt from home, running around in a pair of sandals; anybody can see that I was not 'off to school' — as one can see, it was an urgent matter.

It was an emergency.

If I had a light on my head, it would probably have been flashing red.

That is why I dragged myself out into the sun; me, who's more afraid of the sun than vampires — I then nearly died from a bicycle accident, which does seem like I have fumbled my priorities.

Even if Ougi-san was the one who actually fumbled.

'So, is the bike… doing, okay?'

I spoke in a deliberative manner.

This can also have stemmed from this being a 'first meeting' with Ougi-san, or from the unease of not having spoken to someone living for a long time, though my communicative abilities were low in the first place.

As low as the earth; like a snake.

I used to have long fringes, covering up my face like a shy kid — which made Oshino Meme-san call me 'Little Miss Bashful'.

Little Miss Bashful.

Now when I think back, that was some nickname.

Well, 'Little Miss Shy' or 'Little Miss Bashful' both make me sound cute, but I am more of a 'Gloomy Miss Dilly-dally'.

It shows a thoughtfulness from Oshino Meme-san — something nowhere to be found in his nephew.

'Hm? Oh, everything's fine, everything's fine. BMXs are durable, after all. And I'm durable too. If you're off to school, I can offer you a ride.'

He did not allow me to change topic, but I cannot stay and entertain him and his

seemingly-prankish questions. Seeing as Ougi-san wasn't hurt, and his bike was doing fine, then there was no reason for me to stay.

For some reason, even without this emergency, I get the feeling that chatting with this person would do me no good.

The events last year also seem to have been the result of talking too much with Ougi-san… no, last year's events were, in the end, my responsibility.

My life changed dramatically, and it was my fault.

But this and that were two separate things.

'That' being my personal guilt, 'this' being Ougi-san's personal eeriness.

Eeriness — oddness.

'I'm not, going, to school. So, thanks, but please no thank you. Goodbye.'

My attempt to speak loudly and clearly has led to more commas than necessary ('thanks, but please no thank you' would also probably mean a fail for my Japanese class, though compared to when I met Ougi-san last year, I would say my vocabulary has improved). Having said that to him, I started to leave the scene (of the accident).

'I see — I thought you *were* heading to school. 'Cos I saw you in uniform just now.'

Ougi-san said, almost teasingly — what was that?

'O-Ougi-san!'

'Woah, something happened? What's with the shouting?'

'Take *this me* to where *that me* is — *I, I'm searching for me!*'

003

The ten-thousand-hour rule.

According to a survey, no matter the field, people who could be called ‘masters’ have spent at least ten thousand hours in their craft.

Flipping it on its head, this means it takes only ten thousand hours to become a master in any craft, which sounds hopeful, but once one thinks of how long ten thousand hours is, it is quite despairing.

There being so little hope, that it turns into despair.

Because there are only twenty-four hours in a day.

To make the maths easier, suppose instead there are twenty-five hours in a day. Four days make a hundred hours; forty days, a thousand; and four hundred days, ten thousand hours.

There are three hundred and sixty-five days a year, so when we subtract the extra hours, ten thousand hours roughly equals a whole year.

‘So that’s it? I can be a master with just a year’s effort!’

Easy-peasy!

…Is not how I think about things, for my life has not been that idyllic. I have lived fifteen years as sort of a human being (by the way, I say ‘sort of’ not out of humility, but because I really was not a human for a while).

As for school, I have made it all the way to the first half of second year middle school. I have behaved well, but haven't taken it too seriously; come to think of it, that is the worst type of student to deal with. Maybe it was because I was a difficult student that I ended up being the one stuffed with all the hard work.

But that is in retrospect.

Mr Sasayabu and I seemed like accomplices in that respect — but to treat my past as somebody else's is, in the end, not a healthy thing to do.

Moving on, aside from putting in effort, humans have to live. They have to sleep and eat. They have to go to the toilet, have a bath, they have to change clothes and shave their hair — to work hard in every living moment is simply not doable.

Life precedes hard work.

Hard work is built upon life.

Therefore, there will be times when people cannot work hard.

No matter who, more than half of every day is spent on living. Even if one slaves and puts in over twelve hours of work in a day, if they tire out the next day, then it averages out to no difference.

In terms of efficiency, even if one were to keep at it consistently, an overestimation would still place it at only something like eight hours a day.

This is about the limit.

Eight hours. One third of a day.

Which means the ‘ten thousand hours = one year’ equation needs to be multiplied by three — three years.

Three years, huh…

Whilst not an eternity and seemingly attainable, it remains a real, tangible sum, a timespan that does not make people go ‘it’s gonna work!’, but instead makes them indecisive.

It is just long enough to make it annoying.

Because while ‘giving it one’s all’ sounds beautiful, if one were to give it their all, this also means casting everything else aside.

Prioritising what one thinks is important whilst giving up on everything else that might also be important.

Take me for example.

I have now decided to become a manga artist.

Oh no, I said it! — I am no longer shying away from it.

For real this time.

Little Miss Bashful is no longer Little Miss Bashful.

I’ll have to bash my way through this — this path I have chosen.

Although it was instigated by the swindler, no, although it was the result of being swindled, I still want to give it everything.

Even if I find it exhausting, I am holding onto this opportunity.

I will swallow this dream whole. Like a snake.

But to give it my all, to sink half my life into this, also about equals me quitting my mandatory education in middle school.

Whilst everybody else was learning in their classes, I was in my room, learning how to draw.

I drew and drew, and I did not stop.

I am giving up more than my education.

As everybody else played, argued, and made up with their friends, polishing their life and social skills in the microcosms of society known as schools, I was polishing solely on my drawing skills.

Applying the ten-thousand-hour rule, I gave up working in school — as for what would happen if I kept not going there, if I kept not working on that, I would be lying if I said I wasn't worried.

Everybody's honed social skills would shine too bright for me.

In the end, skipping class for ten thousand hours would probably only yield the habit of skipping class.

Though actually, if all my effort ends with no reward, I could still find something along those lines to make a living, I guess… (this is what is known as a 'jack of all trades'), but leaving aside whether the rule holds up, I don't have the time in the first place.

Not even a third of it.

The reason was, I was given a talking-to not long ago — this morning, my parents finally said it.

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‘Stop wasting time on stupid things like this. Go get a job once you finish middle school.’

004

‘I see, I see. For your parents to call their stupid daughter stupid, it seems those two who have spoiled you as of yet have finally taken away the carrot and introduced the stick — this should be a cause for celebration. Congratulations.’

Ononoki-chan said without emotion, after hearing my rant. Not only her face, but her body was motionless too — though she was modelling for me, so I was grateful for her immobility.

I held in my hand an A3 sketchbook, and drew her posing on the table, in my own room, in my house. Now that I am a hikikomori, most scenes take place in my room now.

Ononoki-chan had just come in through the window.

As of late, she has visited my place four times a week to play — I say to play, she basically comes here to rant.

Yes, today is an exception; normally, Ononoki-chan would be the one doing the ranting — who against? Araragi Tsukihi-chan.

Without exception. It’s all Tsukihi-chan.

To put it simply, Ononoki-chan — Ononoki Yotsugi, is now secretly investigating the Araragi household.

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The unspeakable secret mission seems to be monitoring Tsukihi-chan — Araragi Tsukihi-chan.

…Just imagining the stress makes my head hurt.

Is there really a job in the world this torturous?

Due to that job, I ended up helping Ononoki-chan once, and since then, she has often come over here and stayed.

Four times a week.

Saying that I am a hikikomori seems like a moot point now.

'Stay in the Araragi household for too long and your brain will get fried.'

So she said.

She visits my house, my domain to give herself a break, which would have been a problem, but in actuality it proved greatly helpful.

As I have mentioned, Ononoki-chan is now posing as a model for my sketching.

As a doll oddity, no pose is too hard for Ononoki-chan — be it 'The Thinker' or the 'Venus de Milo', no pose is impossible. More than that, as a doll, she never tires, so she can hold a pose for however many hours I need.

As an addendum, when she poses as the 'Venus de Milo', she even takes off both her arms as an extra service — something that cannot be done unless you are a doll oddity, and the end result is startlingly accurate (and I was absolutely startled at the start).

No, not only poses.

This girl could also partially inflate or bend her parts, shaping her body at will. She cannot miniaturise, but she can expand infinitely, allowing me to draw all sorts of bodies.

Well now, she really can do everything, can't she.

'I never thought I'd see the day when the "Unlimited Rulebook" can serve such peaceful purposes.'

Said Ononoki-chan, who does not seem to mind all this — if I had to nitpick, I would say her face is as fixed and expressionless as a doll, but honestly, by this stage, this is too much to ask.

Clothes and physique alone do not a manga artist make (although Ononoki-chan is always wearing difficult-to-draw piped clothing), but even so, for someone who has only practised on faces until now, Ononoki-chan's visits have been a big help.

A vital assistance.

But to say something like that proves she is but a monster.

To respond to my rant with dripping sarcasm — though as a doll, to not shed tears is something to be expected.

'They didn't say I was stupid… they just said what I was doing was stupid.'

One could say that the two are barely different, which does make it hurt more — I am stupid after all; I didn't need anybody to remind me of that fact.

‘No, for real though, think through this carefully. I don’t think your efforts so far are for nothing, or that someone stupid like you is doing stupid things, but fact is, progress isn’t achieved like that, it has to come at a sacrifice. So your parents setting the baseline at “graduating from middle school” seems a correct choice. What else are you going to do, not go to school or work and have your parents feed you ’til you’re twenty?’

In that case you haven’t grown out of relying on people, Ononoki-chan said flatly.

I have nothing to say to that.

Good point.

Whilst I do not plan to have mum and dad feed me until twenty, I cannot deny that I lack a single vision powering all this effort.

I cannot stay silent on the matter any longer.

Those steps forward were done with my eyes shut.

If I am harder on myself, then to an extent, it is self-indulgence. Maybe some part of me thinks that devoting all my time away from school, away from friends, and only into drawing is something cool.

Without even thinking how much that coolness would cost.

This isn’t modest, it’s plainly lavish.

To ignore reality — if you view it that way, then I have indeed not grown out of relying on others.

‘Considering they didn’t throw you out of the house, your mum and dad still love you

dearly. There's probably some regret in that. Regret for raising their only child as such a useless daughter.'

Undeniable, too, but I wish she didn't say 'raise their only child as such a useless daughter', it seems too harsh.

I'm useless all right.

A useless only child.

'In the end, you could get a job and draw manga at the same time. Alternatively, you could go to the capital and be an assistant, making money as you hone your own craft.'

Biting remarks, but Ononoki-chan is already thinking for my future — it is quite uneasy, being pitied upon by an oddity.

'And the ten-thousand-hour rule thing seems suspect to me anyway. People who are naturals are practically born with it. For someone like me, though, it took a hundred years to become an aberration, let alone three.'

'I don't think becoming an aberration serves as a good benchmark…'

This is one case where it *was* an 'Unlimited Rulebook' — rules consisting majorly of exceptions.

There is no sense in making everybody equal.

People are different from each other, after all.

'Indeed they are. Some people like you can become god with a thought.'

'That wasn't a thought, more a misthought…'

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Though speaking of mistakes, there could be a gargantuan one brewing under my nose right now, at this very moment.

As Ononoki-chan said, leaving home and becoming an assistant seems the most practical route, but I know if I did it, I would lose all sense of groundedness.

It will all feel fictional.

Although I said 'I am skipping school to pursue my dreams', it was not as cool as it sounds. I am not skipping school; I can't be in school.

Such was the severity of what I had done in the classroom.

I have made a huge mess.

For someone as uncouth as I, it would spell trouble keeping a full-time or a part-time job, or even working in general, let alone being a manga artist's assistant.

This is not about social anxiety; this is me being completely asocial.

In that case, I realised I seem to have been going the wrong direction — even if I went ahead with reckless abandon, I will never reach my dreams; in fact, I will stray away from them.

It seems one can end up in such a situation.

Despite that, if I were to continue my studies into high school, frankly, that would also not be a practical path — my grades were not great in the first place, and having suspended my studies for half a year, they have only presumably dropped further.

Catching up is not going to be easy.

Mr Sasayabu's warmth (which is probably more regret) does make me think he would at least see me through graduation, but I cannot ask of him to guarantee anything after that.

So, where should I go next?

'Methodology. 'Tis important, indeed, and also a source of unease. Whether today's efforts could be of use in future is a frustrating question to ponder. In the end, there's no choice but to do it regardless of success or failure. I might be posing for your sketches, but not every manga artist has to know how to sketch a 3D model.'

That's right. This is about technique.

As mentioned above, it will come in handy, but it is not an essential skill — compared to that, poring over books in the library for plot inspirations would seem a wiser choice, such is the dilemma that occasionally plagues me.

Methodology.

No matter how much time is spent, no matter how in-depth the revision went, if it is outside the syllabus, the end result is still mediocrity —

'Through my observations of Araragi Tsukihi, that kid's a fast learner and could do just about everything without a hitch. She's got a great sixth sense too, never seems to guess the questions wrong — the more I see it, the more it annoys me.'

Ononoki-chan spoke her fury in an expressionless voice.

I feel that.

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I. Feel. That.

Meanwhile, I should add that Tsukihi-chan also visits this hikikomori in this room (unlike Ononoki-chan, Tsukihi-chan goes through the front door properly. It may sound unbelievable, but Tsukihi-chan does have at least some degree of common sense), and when she visits, she would help me out with drafting. After a while, she seemed able to draw better than I can, which worries me.

'No point in sulking though',

I said.

Obsessing over methodology also does not help.

The time spent dawdling is better spent doing it — something like that? But a lack of dawdling was what caused this in the first place.

That cannot be helped, right?

Mulling over it 'sulkily' is not going to help, but maybe mulling over it positively might?

'The only thing I can do now is to convince mum and dad by achieving something before graduating from middle school. Like a prize or something. Instead of honing skills such as communication and cheering myself up in less than a year, I think what I am doing right now is more feasible.'

'Dear god… You're entering a competition?'

No, since it is manga, there is basically no other way of getting in, you do know that, right, Ononoki-chan?

'Quite ironic. You gave Senjougahara the deadline of the high school graduation ceremony, and this time *you're* the one facing a deadline.'

Yea, my past coming back to bite me.

Go ahead and laugh all you want.

Me then had lost all my sanity, but even with that said, it is a responsibility I cannot dislodge — this is karma.

And also for gratitude.

'Well, I guess this is the only way to do it, though as a friend, I do want to bluntly remind you that if you don't achieve anything by then, you'll meet a tragic end. You'll have to give up your manga artist dreams, you cannot go to high school, and have no chance of finding a job.'

It's more than tragic, it is a dead end.

Adaptable, but with no place to adapt to.

An apposite end, but really, too harsh.

If I had made at least a friend like that in school, my middle school life would probably have ended up very different — and Tsukihi-chan, the one who *had* all the snide remarks, ended up in a different middle school from me.

'The only consolation you have is probably the fact that this is your last stand. After all, to be able to put in effort is a luxury in itself — surely "an environment where one is allowed to work hard" and "an environment where one must work hard to survive" are two completely different things.'

'I absolutely agree.'

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I do not intend to follow this discussion with something such as 'the talent to give it their all', but I will admit I have failed to create an environment where I am allowed to try my best.

I have failed badly.

I have failed spectacularly. I have failed with all my might.

Since my life now depends on them, I really should convince my parents, save their embarrassment, and pursue my dreams — from their perspective, it was a good thing for their daughter to come back after missing for almost half a year, though for her to return a hikikomori is probably something they never wished for.

I lack empathy for my parents.

I am a kid who does not understand others.

In the end, I am an only child who has not changed at all from the disappearance.

There is no way I can make it on my own.

'Well, the people who're really gunning for their dreams would still insist on it no matter what their parents say, no matter how their parents worry, and no matter how much trouble they give their parents. If you give up just because you are told to, then it's quite far away from that.'

'Absolutely, I also think the same, and I wish I could carry on like that, but I just can't imagine me doing it… I don't have a persistent self.'

Being asked to give up, then blaming them for asking me to give up — that's the me I can imagine.

With that pathetic imagination, I could probably never make it as a manga artist — no, thinking negatively does not help.

Think positively.

Think of me achieving something grand within a year.

'Though if you say you want to succeed no matter what, there is an easy method.'

'Eh?'

Easy?

Then suppose I do want to succeed no matter what, what happens now?

'Sengoku Nadeko. From what I've just heard, your problem is with a lack of time, right? You want to give it your all, and you did say you won't procrastinate, but that sudden announcement of a deadline threw all your plans into whack, right?'

'Uh, mmm… yes…'

When she puts it like that, it feels like I am throwing a tantrum.

Ah, well, it is a tantrum, isn't it — to be able to not go to school already shows how sweet my parents are.

'Rather than say they're sweet, they really are spoiling you. Therefore you should complain to them for raising such a useless child; "*you* two are the ones who raised me like this, huhhh!", something like that.'

'How did you know the way I spoke back then, Ononoki-chan?'

‘I am a specialist.’

‘What sort of specialist… besides, how could I possibly say that?’

A stereotypical rebellious phase, that.

To not have gone through that rebellious phase is more a problem for Sengoku Nadeko, or the Sengoku household, for that matter.

Which is why my parents took a sudden, forceful approach in solving things —

‘As I was saying, there is a way. Essentially, you have to make your debut whilst still in middle school, right?’

‘Mm, well…’

It makes me sound like some bright-eyed middle school star, but to become a manga artist in middle school is definitely not a realistic dream.

Shoujo manga artists debuting before fifteen is definitely not a rare thing — though they are definitely in a minority; within shounen, most people debut between fifteen and twenty.

‘There are two ways.’

‘Two? Not one, but two?’

‘I would just stay away from the first one — but, Sengoku Nadeko, I feel like I owe you big time, so allow me to offer some guidance.’

She owes me big time?

All I did was hear you complain about Tsukihi-chan… it seems Ononoki-chan’s time in Tsukihi-chan’s room had been excruciatingly traumatic.

Which was something I could imagine.

There were things I wanted to say about 'some guidance', but for me, time is running out.

If she has a way to get me out of this, then I am happy to give her all the Häagen-Dazs ice cream she wants.

'Guide me, Ononoki-chan.'

'First, after you finish your next piece, stick a photo of your face on it before submitting it. That way the editors would definitely have you on as a bishoujo manga artist.'

She said flatly.

And only flatly.

'Or, well, so far you've only submitted on the internet anonymously, but you can reveal your true identity. Your dramatic life story would surely elevate your work to greater heights.'

'…You think I would do that?'

'Probably not. I'm just saying… with your very short hair and sweatshirt for pyjamas, your cuteness has diminished significantly, as if on purpose, clipping one's wings for redemption yet remaining angelic nonetheless. If you submit your drafts with portraits taken by a pro photographer, I'd wager you'd get the full VIP treatment. Maybe even a call from women's magazines.'

'If I get a call from a women's magazine, I'd say I've gone off track.'

'To model, to step on the runway whilst aspiring to become a manga artist, that's a character the media would like.'

How could an oddity know so much about media-savviness?

'I don't think you should outright deny this approach. It's not exactly something sinister to do. This isn't some shortcut or back alleyway; this is taking the expressway. Your cuteness is a talent in and of itself. For you to throw it away would be a loss to the nation.'

Some praise this is, coming from her.

National, huh.

'If we go by the ten-thousand-hour rule, you've spent not three, but fifteen years being cute, making you a grandmaster of cuteness. The cutest Little Miss Cute in the land. Although you've misused it, which led to last year's events, if you use this cuteness wisely, you could do much good to this world. Look at idols: be they boys or girls, their cuteness brings happiness to many and drives economies.'

She may explain it via economics, though I can definitely see her point on happiness — I just cannot see myself learning how to do it.

Even if you made me watch.

But er, does she know this much about idols too, this oddity?

'For a cute teenage girl to draw a cruel, bloody world — I think this kind of juxtaposition is what the world is looking for. I can't deny that this may dig open fresh wounds, but then again, if you promote yourself as a friendless hikikomori, then you'll be less open to criticism. Creating an aura where only heartlessly cruel souls dare

attack you, that's not difficult. I'll do it for you right away.'

'I've told you, I'm not doing it. It's not the promotion I want.'

Negative promotion, no less.

Also, I am not drawing a cruel and bloodied world of darkness.

'Fair enough. Then I shall shelve this proposal. Now for the second method.'

Ononoki-chan retracted without hesitation.

Well, she was probably only thinking out loud.

Because after all, she said she would not recommend it.

'Oh no, Sengoku Nadeko. The method I think you should stay away from was the second method. I do not recommend it — but now that you have rejected the idol manga artist route, then this is the only other way.'

'Eh? The only other way —'

'All you have to do is put in those ten thousand hours within the year you have.'

She described it as flatly as the first proposal, so I nearly missed it — what did this girl say just now?

'I said, all you have to do is put in those ten thousand hours within the year you have. Technically, you have about ten months left, so ten thousand hours in ten months.'

'N-nononono! Impossible, impossible, impossible, I say, impossible!'

I've told you it's impossible!

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You can only fit ten thousand hours in a year if you give up sleeping or resting! Even if you subtract the hours I have put in so far… it's still marginal, right!?

If I kept drawing and drawing for twenty-four hours straight every day, it'd take less than a week for a weak girl like me to get to the pearly gates!

'Yes, that's right. One flaw with the ten-thousand-hour rule, in my opinion, is that ten thousand hours sounds like a guarantee; well, it is good encouragement, but to equate achieving your dreams with practice alone completely ignores chances of errors and obstacles. Overexerting and putting in too much work at a time is the fastest path to failure. Too much work just doesn't make sense. What should matter is the quality of the work put in. If all that accumulates is poor work, then it can only affect one negatively, as some sort of negative promotional material.'

You obviously knew.

Indeed.

Getting to the pearly gates might be an exaggeration, but if one drew non-stop for a long time, one would end up with tenosynovitis — a chronic illness kills any dream of becoming a manga artist.

If I retired from an injury, and someone said 'see, you gave up in the middle of it', that is something I could not handle.

More than that, I *cannot* handle it, even if I wanted to.

There is no firm correlation between hard work and making a star player, though if a star player must come at the expense of a hundred others, it is not a good training method.

'"Where generals conquer, myriads perish", huh; but I find voodoo a better metaphor — maybe that still happens after becoming a manga artist. The best way to get put on the map is to get more manga artists and draw more manga.'

'Mm. I've heard that it really was like that back in the day.'

A world of rigorous, relentless competition, though these days things have gone better in terms of overtime and workers' rights.

Which is a good thing.

Well, for me, I am not even sure if this was the future awaiting me.

'Then, what should I do? Accumulating ten thousand hours of effort in a year without overworking is impossible. Absolutely impossible. If I want to do three years' work in one year, then even without caring about quality, I will have to treble the workload.'

'Geez. You are a girl who was once a god. Even if you haven't tried it before, for you to make the impossible possible must be easier than becoming a manga artist?'

Ononoki-chan said without emotion the crux of her second proposal. If she could do a posed look, now would have been the time.

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‘You don’t treble the workload, you treble *yourself*.’

005

You just treble the number of yous.

The number of yous.

I had no idea what Ononoki-chan was talking about.

'As I've been saying, three including yourself… no, that wouldn't inspire confidence. Then let's say, five. That would make the rotation easier.'

She continued, fiddling the sums as she went.

I stopped sketching.

All things considered, what is this kid trying to make me do?

Colour me befuddled.

'No, no, that's what I'm saying, you've just said a manga artist is also somewhat dependent on their assistants. So it is not a solo effort, but more a member of an organisation, a group.'

'M-Mm. Teamwork is important, so you need good communication in order to make it too…'

'Which means you have no idea if you have what it takes to lead a group, let alone be an assistant — we'll save that problem for the future. But, no matter how introverted you are, if you are *facing yourself*, then you'd have less trouble communicating, right? So all you need to do is prepare four of yourselves as assistants.'

This is getting even more confusing.

40

Seeing that I have stopped sketching, Ononoki-chan stopped her posing, and jumped off the table.

She landed without a sound.

Her unparalleled body control can be gleamed from this small move alone.

'Apologies for being blunt, but this is part of my specialty — did I mention before, that apart from being a doll oddity, I am also an onmyōji's shikigami?'

'Shikigami —'

Uhh… I have heard of that quite often.

More accurately, I see it in manga all the time.

I have no idea what a shikigami is technically supposed to be though.

Nor do I know much about even onmyōji.

Ononoki-chan being an oddity is something I heard from her the first time we met, but come to think of it, I had never asked about her origin story. Though the fact that she straight up told me probably means it's no secret.

'To call myself "shiki*gami*" in front of a former *kami* [god] is quite disrespectful. I'm okay with being called a familiar, though. But basically, I am a faithful and loyal servant to my master — however, unlike a vampire's kin, a shikigami acts more as an agent. If kin were family, then a shikigami would be more a butler or a maid;'

In my case, my master, onee-chan, cannot walk on the ground, so my job is to do all her

footwork and go all over the place — Ononoki-chan explained plainly.

Whilst plain, I did not quite understand it fully.

She may say I was a god, but I don't know much about oddities — a lot of it I have already forgotten.

Onee-chan? Who cannot walk on the ground?

'I'll introduce her to you when we get the chance. If it was onee-chan, she would definitely give you a good talking-to the moment you meet her.'

I do not want to have a good talking-to the first time I meet someone.

Ononoki-chan refers to her as 'onee-chan', but from what I am hearing, it does not sound like her blood-related sister.

A doll's sister is merely an abstract concept, after all.

'Anyway, just as onee-chan has me, a shikigami, to do her bidding, what I propose is you make your own. Given that you cannot do it alone, if five of you co-operate, then no matter the effort or the results, you could achieve something within the year.'

Mmmm.

Even if I don't quite get it, I think Ononoki-chan is trying to tell me something… when she says 'to make shikigami', does she mean pursuing another dream?

'If you cannot even achieve this kind of dream, what makes you think you can

become a manga artist? Is that really what you are thinking?'

No, that's exactly what I am thinking.

Please don't say it like it's a cool line.

'Let's do the sums.'

Ononoki-chan grabbed the sketchbook I hugged and reached for a G nib pen from my pen holder.

Why a G nib…

But all is well as long as she doesn't use my spoon nib.

'We are ten months away from graduation, which is about three hundred days. Divide ten thousand by that, take out the remainder, that makes a hundred hours every three days. Meaning you need to work thirty-three hours a day.'

At this point, the sums clearly do not add up.

It is nine hours over.

But Ononoki-chan continued writing — handling that G pen, which is difficult for beginners, quite well.

Although she held it with her fingers curled up like a fist.

'We distribute these thirty-three hours amongst the group, a group of five. Let's divide labour like worker ants do; the ones who do the work versus the benchwarmers form a ratio of eight to two, so that means four of them work whilst one of them rests. Every person works eight hours, eight times four equals thirty-two. We're still one hour short, so let's tack on another fifteen minutes

to everyone to make thirty-three — and there you go, ten thousand hours.'

'I see…'

I cannot help but feel I am lied to by these numbers, but if my work is rotated amongst five people, then I can get a full ten-thousand-hour total before graduation.

Obviously, this is only on paper, and there will be days when I am tired or when I get sick, or when something happens that renders everybody incapacitated, so it will probably not go to plan, but I am not known for lack of trying. Factor all those in, and it should work.

But, compared to the first proposal, something else is making me very uncomfortable with this proposal.

'Ononoki-chan, I don't want to have others do the labour for me… because all my life, I've been forcing this upon Tsukihi-chan or Kaiki-san, which was why I ended up here in the first place.'

'Mm, I think so too, wholeheartedly. You are completely correct. You have finally said something right.'

The lady doth agree too much.

It appears she was getting frustrated at me, too.

'That's why in the end it has to be you who puts in the hours — you should be the one putting in the effort. Which means all your shikigamis have to be Sengoku Nadekos — that was what I meant when I first said it, didn't I? For the user, shikigami are their

agents, they do things for them, such are their existences. Therefore…'

Ononoki-chan flipped the sketchbook to a blank page, and gave it back to me.

'What you need to do is draw *four self-portraits* in this sketchbook — *four Sengoku Nadekos*. Then I'll help you turn them into three dimensions.'

Materialise them.

And build four shikigami.

006

So that's it.

I could finally nod.

In understanding.

I could see what Ononoki-chan is getting at — what she wants me to do is something like 'The Five Doraemons'.

'The Five Doraemons'.

One of the most ambitious chapters in the renowned children's manga *Doraemon* that tackles time paradoxes.

Even if one has not read it, it is a classic on the same level as 'Goodbye, Doraemon', 'A Grandmother's Recollections', or 'Nobita's the Night Before a Wedding', so everybody should already be familiar with it; I shall not waste too many words introducing it, but in essence, Doraemon uses a time machine to bring future versions of himself, five in total including himself, to finish Nobita's colossal amounts of homework.

But for me, I do not have a time machine, so I have no way of summoning myself two hours in the future, or myself four hours in the future, but Ononoki-chan said there was another way to approach it.

She continued her thesis.

'Don't you remember? The first time I visited your room — back then, I asked you to draw a slug. In order to fool Araragi Tsukihi, I took what remained of the Slug Tofu from you, then used my professional

skills to materialise it, although the Slug Tofu you drew proved more powerful than I thought, and became a super Slug Tofu…'

'Huh… mm, that was something you did.'

'Whilst this undoubtedly proves Araragi Tsukihi's menace, this was also proof of your illustration skills. Or perhaps potential. The reason I have come to your house and modelled for you often since is not only to thank you for letting me rant, but also because I sense something oddballish from you.'

'Oddballish?'

A word that filled me with glee, but sadly, she did not mean what I thought she meant.

'Your talisman *rivals talismans drawn by local experts*; that is your risk.'

'I don't want to draw talismans…'

I had a tough time precisely because of talismans.

I never expected Ononoki-chan to visit my room often for this reason.

Turns out the 'odd' in 'oddballish' was oddities related…

And 'risk' —

When for me, *talismans* were the things that posed the biggest risk.

Now that I am a subject of surveillance, does that mean I am the same as Tsukihi-chan?

I'm the same as Tsukihi-chan. That's a horrifying thought.

‘For shapeless demons, visualisation is key to their form, whether for Toriyama Sekien or Toriyama Akira.’

This is the first time I have ever heard Toriyama Sekien and Toriyama Akira put in the same sentence — well, as far as their influence goes, both represent the zenith of their crafts.

Visualisation, huh.

‘In prose you always get a feeling you can’t put your finger on, but once there is an illustration, everything becomes easier to imagine, doesn’t it? Sherlock Holmes’ iconic deerstalker cap was in fact added in by the illustrator, but now every time you see one, you’d think, “oh, a detective”, don’t you?’

The deerstalker thing was very well-known, but haven’t we gone off track?

No, if this is part of me learning how to draw, then it is still on topic — ghost stories, originally purely word-of-mouth, gain significant meaning when given shape and form via illustrations. Besides, literacy in Japan back then must have been a lot lower than it is now.

‘Mm. Wouldn’t you say that the popularity of Vocaloid’s Hatsune Miku comes from her character design matching her powerful features? On the other hand, the story has it that *Akage no Anne* was originally going to feature a blonde girl on the cover. Maybe it wouldn’t have been a problem were it not for the title meaning “Red-haired Anne” — and speaking of, titles and names are also

paramount. “Hatsune Miku” means “the first voice of the future”.’

She really likes Hatsune Miku.

I had never heard that about *Akage no Anne*.

Although I think in its original English it was titled *Anne of Green Gables*?

‘Which, bringing me back to what I was saying, I want to test how odd your talents are; how much energy lies within your illustrations — and if your self-portraits can be successfully conjured as shikigami, then I would introduce you to Gaen-san.’

What good does that do for me?

This Gaen-san played an important role in me becoming a god, didn’t she?

I do not mean this as an accusation, but when I think of what she makes of me… honestly, I do not want anything more to do with her.

‘Exactly. It is not an excuse to repay. That’s because, Sengoku Nadeko, unlike Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, you have not been designated harmless yet. As far as results go, you didn’t do anything catastrophic; in other words, for an amount of time, this town kept its peace because of you, so there is still no consensus for what to do with you amongst the experts, though it would be no surprise to them if you were vanquished. Precisely because you’re no longer a god and pose no risk, it wouldn’t be strange if some people saw your demise as an easy career promotion.’

It's a dog-eat-dog world.

Whilst it was an enormous transgression, to die not due to karma or punishment, but simply for someone else's career is a fate I strongly resent.

'Isn't that right? So if Gaen-san knows of your odd talents, and you prove reliably useful to her, then that monster of connections could take you under her wing.'

An expert who sounds more like a monster.

Someone reliably useful… I don't like the sound of that.

Something in her words seemed to have convinced me regardless… but, leaving aside any positives, this suggestion has at least no negatives for me.

Seriously though, it's something I wanted to confirm too — whether it was true that my slug illustration materialised into something even Ononoki-chan couldn't handle. How will I even accept that?

Risk.

For a manga drawn as if one's life depended on it — because one's life depended on it; for it to cause such a monumental incident once realised, once materialised into an aberration — even if it was not for their career, it wouldn't be a surprise if they decide to eliminate me.

If such latent powers still exist within me, I must expunge all of it, or at the very least control it.

Therefore, this test can be considered a touchstone for me.

Hm.

'Understood, I'll try it… all I have to do is draw four of myself?'

Self-portraits; well, they are the bread and butter of drawing, so it was not going to be difficult. Before Ononoki-chan's frequent visits, I actually posed in front of the mirror, or took pictures of myself, and sketched out my character *dessins* with me as my own model.

It's just that,

'Mm. However, could you introduce some variations to each design?'

Ononoki-chan requested.

'If there is no way of identifying which Sengoku Nadeko is which, it would be quite a headache. Consider the worst-case scenario: five Sengoku Nadekos, but nobody can tell who the real one is. That'd be a big nightmare.'

That would not just be a big nightmare.

It would present a complete collapse of identity.

'Though, real talk, there were cases when the shikigami, the agent, ended up replacing the onmyōji themselves. So even if they are Sengoku Nadekos, could you also ascribe different personalities to each of them?'

Quite a tough request indeed.

I guess this is akin to drawing twins in a manga: even though they look the same,

there ought to be enough detail within for readers to differentiate between them.

The manga artist within me began rubbing her hands.

My motivation has mildly gone up.

'Then we can start by giving them different hairstyles… aha'

A flash of inspiration.

I may not have a time machine to transport future mes back here, but I can easily draw past mes.

Although not as much as Tsukihi-chan, my hairstyle has changed quite frequently also — given that this is a 'five-person project', does that mean four hairstyles in addition to the very short style I currently have?

I pondered as I started sketching.

First and foremost, the longest.

Both in terms of the time I had it, and hair length itself.

'Oh, fringe mode. I've never seen that, actually.'

'Mm, that's right. If I remember correctly, this version of me got called Lady Forelocks…'

I was teased for it often.

It did not cover my embarrassment at all.

'Long fringes so that nobody could see your face… inward, Sengoku Nadeko at her mildest… then let's call her Gentle Nadeko.'

Gentle Nadeko…

It sounds very mature and grown-up for adults, but it is still better than Lady Forelocks, so I will call her that.

Hmmm.

It is difficult to draw a face whose eyes are covered up by her hair… but this is me, this was something I did.

The eyes really are the windows to one's soul.

This is less approachable than even Ononoki-chan's expressionlessness… if someone like this were in class, it is a bit spooky.

Frightful, even; how could a child like this be called cute?

Though to view it with such disapproval is probably self-torment on my part.

Well, I will fine-tune it when I am finalising it.

Next up.

The second me.

'Hm? I've never seen this before either… holding back your fringes with a headband… so that's a phase you went through. Ah, that. Was it the Sengoku Nadeko who desperately tried to approach and impress a Certain Someone?'

She knows, somehow.

Perhaps as a professional, in order to investigate someone who has got into trouble before, she ended up knowing my entire backstory.

Leaving that aside, unlike Gentle Nadeko, this Sengoku Nadeko was easy to draw, with no fringes hanging out the front and having a bare forehead.

I realised just now that having eyes makes plenty of difference. Consider this a new discovery.

'Let's call her Fawning Nadeko.'

That's cruel.

I am about to burst in tears.

'This is the Sengoku Nadeko who wore the micro-bikini in that short story, right? How else could you describe it other than fawning?'

Indeed, it could not be anything else.

Although I dismissed her mentioning the anime-based short stories, I caved in. We'll just call her that.

With that name, I also gave her quite a flirtatious expression — titling is important, as Ononoki-chan said earlier, and only now did I fully realise its impact.

Gentle Nadeko and Fawning Nadeko, huh…

Deciding on names is pretty much now or never — but what shall I call the third me…

It flowed from my hand.

'Ah. I've seen this before, it's that. The Sengoku Nadeko when Araragi Tsukihi snipped off the fringes you've proudly held, right?'

'Mmm… more specifically, after the snipping, when Karen-san repaired it for me.'

I will give her credit for detail, though.

No, I do remember, Ononoki-chan came to this town during this time, right? Is that why she remembers?

'Mm, I play here often. But I saw it in the anime.'

You're acting too freely.

'This was the hairstyle you had when you caused that giant kerfuffle in the classroom, right? The same reason why you cannot go to school even now?'

Her saying giant kerfuffle was not something I wanted to hear, but it was one all right.

Memories, memories.

'Your rage was as intense and out-of-place as if someone hit your berserk button, making you spill forth all your inner thoughts. Then let's call this Sengoku Nadeko Anti-Nadeko.'

That name is pretty much official in the first place.

I heard that that was the name used in the anime audio commentaries (I was called that, and the culprit was none other than Tsukihi-chan).

'And as for the fourth Sengoku Nadeko, there's no need to think about her hairstyle.'

'Mm… there's no other option.'

It is the only one.

The me who was worshipped at Kitashirahebi Shrine.

When I was a deity — when I was the serpent god.

Me then had a hairstyle even more avant-garde than Anti-Nadeko — after all, out of a hundred thousand strands, every single one was a snake.

An unbelievable character design.

Ridiculous.

It would be impractical to draw a hundred thousand strands (that'd probably take ten thousand hours), so I cut some corners here and there; consider this a manga technique.

Although frankly, I had a lot of fun drawing it.

The nib rolled on smoothly, as did my strokes.

'Indeed, I've heard that for those who draw well, they prefer drawing creatures over handsome beauties.'

No, when I was drawing Gentle Nadeko, Fawning Nadeko, and Anti-Nadeko, I was not trying to draw a beauty — whilst excessive self-torment is no good thing, if I drew myself too attractively, that would also be a mood-killer.

'I see. So by drawing yourself normally you end up looking cute.'

Ononoki-chan said, without reservation.

But ultimately, this is something I have to face — even though the attaching-a-photo-of-myself-to-my-submissions idea is dead in the water.

Right, all done.

Me as a medusa.

'Let's call her Divine Nadeko.'

In the end, Ononoki-chan chose all the names.

Maybe she likes the feeling of making final decisions.

'It's alright if the team had six people in it, are you sure you don't want to pop in DJ Nadeko?'

‘I say, that kid has never really existed, not even in the anime.’

‘Right then, Present Nadeko. Could you then draw all four of them from head to toe? This will take more time, and it would help if you put in details. Put you heart into it — put your soul into it. When you’re done, I’ll apply my techniques to this sketchbook.’

‘Mm… uh, you just called current me Present Nadeko, didn’t you? Could you please not do that? I don’t want my real self to be called the same way as my shikigami.’

‘Understood’, said Ononoki-chan casually. I started with my pen — this could make or break the rest of my year, my future. Upon thinking that, I *have* to give it my all.

Draw, draw, draw, hyah!

007

‘So Sengoku-chan started drawing with a “hyah!” then. Putting pen to paper, just like that? Ha-ha. What a fool —’

Ougi-san’s chipper commentary was as if hearing a rare, funny episode in a rapidly-decaying society — although I have some reservations about his attitude, now that I was on his BMX, I cannot complain much.

He might crash again.

Specifically, I was standing on the rear wheel, normally reserved for stunt performances. This was the first time I had done that, and trying to balance alone had me working up a cold sweat.

Ougi-san’s whimsical commentary was not something I had room to react to.

Leaving that aside, two people sharing a bike is already illegal, but I had no choice — I think there is a case here for emergency evacuation.

Please let it be true.

Because I *have* to capture the four of me who escaped.

‘“The four of me who escaped”, huh?’

Ougi-san gave a light chuckle.

Without even looking, I could about imagine what kind of smile he has on his face — it was something I could picture. I am not drawing it out though. The situation I am in the middle of is traumatic enough that I am

tempted to quit drawing for the rest of my life.

But, as expected of boys.

Even with me in the back seat (no, wait, the back stand), he pedalled as if I were not weighing him down.

…He is a boy, right?

Leaving aside whether we *were* meeting for the first time… no, for some reason, the more I talked about it, the more I was sure we were meeting for the first time.

A boy that I was meeting for the first time.

Knowing that, to share a bike with a boy I met for the first time poses a different kind of danger too.

'So what you meant was your test proved wildly successful. Four Sengoku-chans — Gentle Nadeko, Fawning Nadeko, Anti-Nadeko, and Divine Nadeko, all four states of Sengoku-chan have been neatly conjured from two to three dimensions. Ha-ha. My goodness, this is amazing. I'd even wager that Yotsugi-chan had no idea that all four would be conjured without a hitch — instead of actually needing the manpower, she's likely trying to increase the success rate by 'casting the net wide'. She'd probably go hip-hip-hooray even if there's only one or two that ended up as shikigami.'

'Mm… she did say so after that.'

Speaking of Ononoki-chan, she is now making her way in the opposite direction, also searching for the four mes — her

mobility I have confidence in, but even so, I should not just sit back and watch.

Those four mes.

I cannot let those four Nadekos wander free.

'Ha-ha. Hearing you say "Nadeko" reminds me of when Sengoku-chan used it for the first-person.'

'…How would you know that if we are meeting for the first time?'

'Oh, my bad. Pretend I said nothing just now.'

If I could let you off the hook like this, then pretend I also did nothing this morning.

Please.

'Nono, powerless little me can only help you find your way — find your way towards that Sengoku-chan in the uniform. That's the small role I play in this tale.'

Sengoku-chan in the uniform, huh.

In other words, that should be Gentle Nadeko.

Whilst finalising the designs of the four Nadekos, I gave all of them different clothes — allowing me to differentiate them without only looking at their hairstyles once they have materialised.

'But Sengoku-chan, why would the four Sengoku-chans run away after they materialised as shikigami? Shouldn't the four of them work together with you and start drawing manga to get to that ten-thousand-hour mark?'

Eh? Did I reveal that much?

There was no use hiding my goal of becoming a manga artist, so it didn't make much difference.

'Did Yotsugi-chan leave something out? That kid's with Tsukihi-chan these days — and when anyone's with Tsukihi-chan, something always goes wrong; is that why she messed up big time?'

So Ougi-san is also closely acquainted with Tsukihi-chan…?

He spoke as though he knows Tsukihi-chan personally, although I always think that Ougi-san and Tsukihi-chan would make an apocalyptic duo.

However, Ononoki-chan herself seemed to mind that as well ('I've been underachieving recently', she had reflected without emotion), though for this incident, only I, Sengoku Nadeko, Present Nadeko am to blame for this boneheaded moment.

'It's my fault for not thinking through…'

'Uh huh. Same as me, then?'

It was not the same.

'"To aspire becoming a manga artist" is *current me*'s stance… so even as I succeeded in conjuring past mes as shikigami, they would not be willing to help me.'

More than that, 'there is no use hiding my goal of becoming a manga artist' is also only applicable for current me; for past Sengoku Nadekos, it was a goal, a dream she went to great lengths to hide.

There was no point in hoping all of us would work together.

No hope in having a workable rotation.

More a self-perpetuating blizzard of self-hatred.

My quiet hikikomori abode had transformed into a cataclysmic battleground — whilst I did manage to calm everybody down, that also meant becoming the one everybody hated the most.

In the end, the four Nadekos did not even help me with the frames, and ended up scattering all over the place.

Since they all scattered at the same time, it left me and Ononoki-chan no time to react — the only thing they can co-operate on is making their escape.

Which was terribly like me.

When it comes to escaping, I am Japan's number one.

By the way, there was one Nadeko who escaped out of the window — it goes without saying, that was Divine Nadeko. I expect nothing less from Sengoku Nadeko in her deity days.

Not just strong in body, but free in spirit too.

She escaped with a kyahahahaha! 'Twas terrifying.

But I cannot spend the rest of my life terrified. My utmost priority right now is to locate and retrieve all four of me, including Divine Nadeko — otherwise this town would soon be gripped by panic!

‘No, I don’t think it’d be that serious, no? It’s just four people roaming about who just happen to look the same as you, innit?’

Ougi-san’s response was akin to a splash of cold water.

He was right.

Panic was too strong a word.

On that note, for the four to scatter might be a blessing in disguise — four identical-looking people walking together would raise eyebrows plenty, but now that they had split apart, each one of them was just another middle school girl.

The town’s peace would probably be kept as long as their identity as shikigami was kept tight under wraps. It wasn’t the town that would descend into panic, but myself, as well as the one who got into trouble again, Ononoki-chan.

No, well, anyway, that could only be said for Divine Nadeko.

Strolling around town with a hundred thousand snakes on her head is prime phone camera fodder.

‘Well, about that, she is a god after all. She’s probably got some tricks up her sleeve to not be seen by ordinary folk — I think the other three should be your concern. If any of those three get into trouble, it’ll be you, Present Nadeko, who shoulders those responsibilities.’

That was true.

I cannot believe it turned out like this.

For me, who always ran away from responsibility, to now shoulder the responsibilities of others — those others being all me, of course.

Suppose they commit something worse than sharing a bike — oh no, Anti-Nadeko is making me *really* worried!

Then she is the one that should be prioritised; however, one ought not to ignore Gentle Nadeko or Fawning Nadeko either.

I had no idea what shenanigans past me could be up to!

'Ha-ha. Quite. When Sengoku-chan was still Gentle Nadeko, she'd play with snakes, dismember them, and nail 'em onto trees.'

That was not playing. I was fighting for my life.

'Besides, I didn't nail them on trees. Though when I hear Ougi-san saying that, I can't help but think that I did.'

'Considering it's the first time we met, there's no way I'd say something like that. Don't tell me you've subconsciously followed the anime adaptation? Ha-ha. Past events are ripe for future exaggeration.'

…Well, when it comes to last year's events, my subconscious was not something to be relied on.

Although exaggerating the past was something I was facing right now.

After all, I did chop snakes into bits, so Gentle Nadeko could be armed with chisels; one wayward move and I could get hurt when facing her — I must be careful.

‘Right, here we are. This was where I saw Sengoku-chan in uniform before I almost hit you.’

Ougi-san said whilst braking all of a sudden, as if sending it into reverse — I almost flew out, but I held on fine, as I looked at where I was.

Where Ougi-san witnessed myself.

This was a place I was familiar with.

The front gates of Public Middle School #701.

008

I should have guessed.

There was only one place Sengoku Nadeko would go in uniform: school — in this instance, having saw me around school in my uniform, yet continuing to tease out details like some jester… I think Ougi-san poses more of a problem here.

Having already seen me in uniform around school, he should have been more shocked when he nearly crashed into me after… this guy might wear a lively face, but in the end, he seemed more difficult to read than the expressionless Ononoki-chan.

His eyes devoid of light.

But now that he has got me here, I can't complain much.

'Uuuu…'

Stepping off the bike, I hugged my quivering body.

How should I put it… for a hikikomori like me, to step out of home was not only an accomplishment in itself, but an accomplishment of a lifetime.

Even though all I did was go out the front door. I know I am lying to myself.

But of all places for shikigami me to go, the school… the school? School.

What a troublemaker.

Just like me.

Then again, that was probably not what she had in mind. She probably goes with the

flow even more than me who is chasing her down. In the end, it was inconceivable for a girl with a school uniform to imagine herself truant the very next school year.

Because that happened from last November onwards… taking away the time when I was a god, that would be since February.

However, for someone to cause trouble so naturally, it is no wonder that the Sengoku Nadeko of old has been described as devilish — hmmm, this is something that cannot be experienced unless one is on the receiving end of trouble.

So then, what follows next.

Frankly, I was about as willing to step into school as I was willing to step into a toxic swamp — my heart started racing upon that thought.

Were I to meet my classmates… no, now that it was a new school year, everybody would be in a different class now, so the class where I did that should have collapsed into other places, should it not?

'You seem troubled, Sengoku-chan.'

Ougi-san said as he stepped off his bike, spoken as if he was offering a helping hand.

'If you want, I could go in on your behalf. I just have to look for Sengoku-chan in the uniform, right? I can handle this, no problem.'

'……' '……' '……'
'……' '……' '……'
'……' '……' '……'
'……' 'No, it's okay.'

Ten Sengoku Nadekos in my head had a little meeting, where nobody said anything and the silence was deafening. Although normally I would not imagine my mild-mannered self saying so, I declined Ougi-san's otherwise charitable suggestion.

Compared to my shikigami, if he acted as an agent for me, I have this premonition that it would cause even more chaos.

The heart that was racing was practically ringing like an alarm bell at this point.

'Splendid. If Kanbaru-senpai possessed such decisiveness, she'd probably not be running around in circles 'cos of me now.'

This person is running Kanbaru-san around in circles, it seems.

How horrible.

'But then again, it'd be a shame if we separated right here; I'll escort you around. Puts people at ease if some girl in some lame sportswear is around with someone in a male school uniform.'

I was not at ease.

Also, did he just describe me as lame?

I might feel awkward whenever somebody says I am cute, but directly saying that I am lame is also something I do not handle quite well — and in this case, that statement was not directed at me, but my clothes.

Then again, it does take some courage to enter school in my casual clothes (pyjamas), even discounting the fact that I am a hikikomori.

A courage one typically has no need for.

So if Ougi-san was willing to come with me in his male school uniform, I cannot help but feel grateful.

Even though it is a male school uniform, Ougi-san's uniform is not that of Public Middle School #701, but that of Naoetsu High School, although that prestigious private high school's signature school uniform would probably give an even more trustworthy impression.

So let us pretend that Ougi-san is an alumnus of the school. Such acting, or should I say such deception, seemed to be right up Ougi-san's alley.

I say this with certainty, even though it was the first time we met.

'Righto, *ikuzo*～'

Ougi-san stepped in the gates with zero hesitation, as if entering his own home — although I could not imagine what kind of home he lives in.

No cycling allowed in school premises, so we had to find a place to park this BMX.

Where *were* the bike racks? I thought as I followed Ougi-san.

And just like that, I returned to the middle school I thought I would set foot in ever again, not even for graduation.

009

What awaited me was something quite unexpected.

No, everything since this morning has been full of surprises, sometimes even overwhelming (parents giving me a time limit → Ononoki-chan's morning visit → shikigami experimentation → success → escape → pursuit → near accident → pursuit → entering school), but things were yet to take another about-face.

Not once, but twice.

Doesn't doing that twice get you back to where you started? That makes it no longer an accident — the situation begs to differ, though.

First of all, the one who escaped into school was not the first — Gentle Nadeko, but the second — Fawning Nadeko. That was what surprised me.

Because in my sketchbook, I was sure I had Fawning Nadeko wearing a cute camisole.

It seems she has changed clothes.

Her fringes were still pulled back with that headband… but there were not that many ways of getting a school uniform.

She probably exchanged them somewhere with Gentle Nadeko after the escape — turns out Sengoku Nadekos can work with each other.

Whatever happened to my self-hatred?

But then again, amongst all five Sengoku Nadekos, Gentle Nadeko and Fawning Nadeko can be said to be the closest to each other.

They were closely-knit in their timelines, after all.

They may have different hairstyles, but once the headband comes off, Fawning Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko have basically the same design, and look near-identical to each other.

And here's the main point, Fawning Nadeko's overbearing personality would easily convince (or coerce) the gloomy Gentle Nadeko to swap clothes with her — if they can catch both myself and Ononoki-chan out, then this scheme does not seem too far-fetched or disadvantageous for Gentle Nadeko.

For me at my most timid to wear a camisole is a pitiful sight, but I will save that for later — one should now focus on the Sengoku Nadeko at hand, that is, Fawning Nadeko.

Which brings me to my second unpleasant surprise.

The actions this Fawning Nadeko undertook in school was a problem — a problematic action.

Not long after circling around with Ougi-san in the middle school, the bell rang — it was recess.

This was not good.

As teachers and students finish their classes, they might see us — and the very last thing I want is to be seen by Mr Sasayabu.

It would be me who gets caught.

The only person I can rely on now is Ougi-san, but in a scenario like that, it would not prove surprising if a person like that betrayed me on the spot.

He would vanish into thin air.

So I have to make haste on the few clues we have — hmmm, normally, for 'me then', I would go directly to the class I am in, wouldn't I.

But the class I was in in second year was already no more. Then…

'Sengoku-chan, I would very much avoid dissociating and referring to your shikigami as "me then" — after all, shikigami are like infants, not a year-old Sengoku Nadeko brought in via a time machine.'

Ougi-san advised.

It was good advice, too.

Yes, these were drawings that *this year's* me did on *this day* — when one looks at it that way, they were as current as current me.

My agents, my body doubles.

It is the same as that old answer manga artist sometimes give in interviews, that 'the characters are all parts of the author'. More than that, sometimes 'the characters move on their own' as well…

Then, even if she went to the classroom, it probably was not as a second year, but based on current me, as a third year?

An infant, huh.

Well, in the end, a drawing's a drawing; it probably cannot think for itself… as my room descended into a battlefield, they seemed to act out of instinct.

Having an ego but not a self?

Or perhaps characteristics…

Then instead of infants, perhaps a better metaphor would be artificial intelligence programmes — I heard the most recent AIs were miles cleverer than myself; but with no other leads, I guess it was time to head to the year three students' classrooms.

Speaking of, whilst I knew I was a third-year student according to the documents, without having had the feeling of advancing another year, I entered the third-year classroom block with trepidation.

Trembling. Uhh, what class *was* I in?

'Class 5'

Ougi-san stated.

How did *he* know?

'Ahh, this isn't me being mysterious like I usually am, I've just heard it from Kanbaru-senpai. That girl worries about you a lot.'

I see.

'Being mysterious like I usually am' was a line that glided off the top of my head, but even so, how that nugget of knowledge managed to make its way to Ougi-san was quite a feat on its own. The same can be said for Kanbaru-san too, whose knowledge about what class I was in feels almost stalker-ish, though I was grateful.

It turned out to be a big help for me today.

'Though I did tell her to stop caring like how someone counts the age of some already-dead child.'

'She's not dead, she's still living. Five of them.'

Class 5, huh.

We sneaked along the corridor — I say sneaked, my very short hair meant my face was in full view even if I looked down. Ougi-san, meanwhile, stood tall and proud as an outsider — suspiciously tall and proud.

I got the feeling that the students we did walk past seemed to actively avoid us — some of them might have been classmates of old, though they probably would not recognise me in this hairstyle and the sweatshirt.

In their heads, all they probably did was stay away from a weird duo.

If the truth got out, they would definitely be surprised — though only the looks had changed. No substantial growth.

Then again, speaking of surprised, the sight that greeted me in the classroom of year 3, class 5 gave me one all right. Nobody else in the school would be as surprised as I am, wondering if they were seeing things — but there it was, in the middle of the classroom.

Fawning Nadeko with her headband was in the classroom, chatting and kidding away almost uncannily with my classmates I do not know.

010

‘Mm, ye, gotcha, gotcha. Same~. Aah~, so that’s it, Ah din’ know that. Ooh~. Look at that~. What’s that, that’s cute~. Sure, sure. How’d that turn out, it looks incredible~. Wow~. Ah’ve heard that before! Where did you find it, Ah loved it as a kid; ye ye, loooved it~. Iss’ been like that all the time. Oh no ye it’s great talkin’ like this. The vibe too. Ah feel like Ah’m the happiest person in the world. Iss’a miracle. Eh, it’s been that long? Felt like the blink of an eye. Yeyeyeye. Oh! Thank you! It’s the best so far, in’t’it? Oh geez, seriously~. Enuff with that, come on~. Every single time. Oh! Ah seen it on the internet! Yeye, and, and? Aw ye Ah wanna be just like you. Ah’ve wanted that long ago. How didya know? Teach ya next time~. It’s like magic, Ah couldn’t do it if Ah tried! Though one can hope. Would be great if that happened. Alright, a promise’s a promise!’

…Conversing fluently with her classmates, her answers vapid and meaningless — it was none other than Fawning Nadeko, in a uniform.

From the formation, Fawning Nadeko was literally at the centre of attention, boys and girls surrounding her, though her flattery really is astounding — it worked for everybody, front and back, left and right.

Was she using ‘Ah’ for ‘I’ as well?

Her knowledge of trends was the real deal.

A horrifically modern child.

From that alone, this girl is nothing like the me last summer — not my own self, but a creation, a caricature of Sengoku Nadeko.

A constructed Sengoku Nadeko.

'……'

But, how should I put it,

This manufactured, fake, ridiculous impostor of Sengoku Nadeko is someone I cannot help but admire.

Envy, even.

Her empty dialogue everywhere unquestionably places her as a side character, if this were a manga. A sidekick whose purpose was to complement the main character, as the stereotypical 'easy-going, chatty, trendy female middle schooler' — that description would not be far off.

Ordinary, shallow as a pancake, straight from an assembly line, a dime a dozen, not knowing right from wrong or from everything else — yet somehow cool, shining.

Dazzling.

Blinding.

No, 'the wish to become an ordinary girl' is really more my subconscious, but that image of 'getting along with one's classmates' was something I longed for a long time ago.

Honestly.

If I could be as friendly with everybody as that, I would not mind not having these dreams and goals, that was how sparkly she was.

Almost draining my willpower.

That me.

That me who is joyous, and spreads joy all around her.

I cannot bear seeing it.

‘“If one is content, one will not deliberately pursue dreams” is probably a saying based in reality. Injustice and dissatisfaction are reasons for hopes and dreams. If you wish to achieve, to reach your dreams, to stand out, and to be loved, to be satisfied, then there’s no need to give up everything and walk a tightrope between life and death; just live comfortably in warm water and bathe in warmth and happiness. Aren’t they both the same anyway?’

Ougi-san said behind me as he peeped into the classroom.

With a hint of irony, too.

‘But then that’d only be temporary. Warm water cools down over time. Things might look good now, but you can’t hide your unease towards the future. When I say future, I mean current you, Sengoku-chan. That girl lacks your figure. A visualisation without a vision. In her eyes, Present Nadeko, who’s pursuing her dreams and giving it her all — *you’d* be sparkly to her.’

Wait, was this consolation? From Ougi-san?

I was not expecting it, but I did feel better.

But this person definitely, absolutely knew he was seeing Fawning Nadeko instead of Gentle Nadeko, yet he was still hiding that from me.

I have no idea if he was friend or foe.

The answer is probably neither.

'Righto, Sengoku-chan, that shikigami should be dealt with, the sooner the better — it's also for your classmates under the spell of your shikigami.'

That's it. That was what I came here for.

And he was right, this was for my classmates as well — indeed, Fawning Nadeko's flattery and intimacy is so perfectly admirable, so smoothly, enviously approachable, that even when she was surrounded on all sides, nothing looks wrong.

But the fact that nothing looks wrong meant that something was wrong.

They may be classmates, but that kid, that is, Sengoku Nadeko, had never gone to school a single day until now. No matter how joyous, how sincere she may be, to fit in within an instant is something unthinkable. Impossible.

My classmates were not recognising me as their classmate. The 'me' in question was of course, Fawning Nadeko. Because I had never gone to school with a headband on.

Then one can say that this sight was an oddity.

It might not be the correct way to describe my past self, but that is what I think — what may look like casual, after-class chatter was actually an active assault from my shikigami against my classmates.

Hmm.

But this feels weird.

There was a certain energy flowing around the classroom, across everybody.

For my drawing to possess such power… although no, come to think of it, Ononoki-chan's own powers could also be a key factor.

Therefore, if this shikigami were to be ended, I would prefer asking Ononoki-chan to come, but there is little time… I will have to think of something myself.

I learnt this method from Ononoki-chan.

'Though they may be shikigami, they are ultimately a sheet of paper — there are many ways to defeat a shikigami, and I shall teach you a method so easy even you can do it. Actually, more accurately, it's something only you could do as their creator… take some blank pages from the sketchbook and bring them with you. Pat the sheet onto the shikigami and fold it in as if you're collecting it, and those Nadekos will be transferred onto paper. From three dimensions back into two.'

Such was her lesson.

A rather primitive, if not violent measure.

'Nono, Sengoku Nadeko, *I'm* the one thinking of using a violent measure. I was going to shatter the shikigami into dust with my "Unlimited Rulebook" — like making recycled paper.'

…I cannot help but feel bad about the Sengoku Nadekos found by Ononoki-chan — in that sense, I guess Fawning Nadeko would be the luckiest of the four.

I thought as I took out a page of quarter fold sketchbook paper — all I had to do is seal her.

Tame it.

Now I felt like a real onmyōji.

Was this how talismans or sacred shintai are made?

'…mm'

Mm.

It took Ougi-san's little nod to remind me what I was here for, but making a move was going to be difficult. Approaching a Fawning Nadeko surrounded by classmates… wait, was this a human barrier?

Was this on purpose?

'Could be. Making close friends and entering the group could be a self-defence mechanism. It seems it lacks self-awareness given that it's new-born, but once that Fawning Nadeko grows up, she could be quite the tricky character to deal with, no? Something that exorcists have to deal with.'

Coming from Oshino Meme-san's nephew, I froze in terror — I've created a monster.

But to maintain this current state, who knows what negative effects could befall my classmates — even though I barely knew half of them and today was the first time I met them.

Though I was now peeking from the corridor, there was a limited timeframe — what if somebody approaches me and starts a chat? There was only one thing I can do — barge into the classroom, no plan in hand.

I was committed.

I remember doing something similar in my Anti-Nadeko days… what *is* that rock-and-roll Sengoku Nadeko up to now?

'E-everyone, don't be fooled! Th-that girl's a fake! I-I am the real thing!'

I gathered my courage and did something no hikikomori would do — I shouted as loud as I can, but nobody turned.

Because in the end, my loudest yell was still a feeble whimper, and even ignoring volume issues, my stutter could also be to blame, although for classmates I am seeing for the first time, a shout like that on who's real or who's fake would be totally unconvincing; that would be the biggest reason why.

Imprisoned by this odd sight, the students remained entranced in this dangerous dream — I could not destroy the human barrier.

All I got was a humiliating defeat.

From which stemmed deep regret and shame.

Yes, I have tasted failure once again. Not in convincing everybody, but in becoming part of the class. Witnessing myself 'in a state of success' has only yielded greater misery.

Aah — how should I put this —

With this sight, I'm better off disappearing —

Because I'm thinner than a sheet of paper; faker than a fake —

Such was the mode of thinking I am trapped in.

Which reminded me of what Ononoki-chan said before: shikigami taking over their masters. That could be possible.

But since everybody looks so happy, and Nadeko herself looks so happy, I thought this was not a bad end — if I can be enveloped in everybody's smiles, and smile back, there is not much in this world that can beat th—

BRRRRRRRRRRRRING!

A deafening noise broke out.

No, not a noise, an emergency bell.

The alarm that sounds when a fire breaks out.

I turned back immediately — the classmates who were surrounding Nadeko also looked towards the corridor.

The corridor?

Even without looking, I knew.

I knew precisely because I did not look.

Ougi-san was not at the classroom door where he was; I realized this as soon as I saw the scene unfolding in front of me. That guy left the classroom door as soon as I went in, and pressed the emergency button!

I cannot believe he just did that.

To trespass into a middle school he has nothing to do with, to press the button when there was not even anything close to an emergency, he really does whatever he wants — though for someone like him to be in that school at that time does count as an emergency.

However, Ougi-san activating the alarm was probably not a prank. At least I hope it wasn't.

Observe: everybody stopped their chatting and stared into the corridor, creating a weak point in Fawning Nadeko's human barrier.

Such was Ougi-san's intent.

It might not be, but I am sticking with that explanation.

However joyful, however dreamlike the conversation, it is impossible to ignore a ringing alarm. At the very least, it was enough to let everybody wake up from this odd scene.

This conversation — this subjugation, has ground to a halt.

Whilst I barged into the classroom and failed spectacularly, that male high schooler was executing a tactic of his own — no, if all he wanted was everybody's attention, there had to be better ways of going about it?

How am I supposed to tidy this up later, I thought as I went for Fawning Nadeko — tidying this current situation seems more paramount than tidying that later situation.

Having not exercised for so long or attended PE classes, I really should not be running in sandals. Even so, I barely broke through the barrier my classmates had formed.

Fawning Nadeko had not escaped.

It seems she had not exchanged shoes, and since there were no indoor shoes in the cabinets, she was wearing something that

could not be run on either: women's court shoes. Although shoes did not matter here; she made no effort to run.

Without moving, yet without fear, let alone bracing, she simply squinted at me, sketchbook sheet in hand, as she smiled mockingly — Sengoku Nadeko mockingly smiled at Sengoku Nadeko, and said,

'Giving it your all and pursuing your dreams… stop embarrassing yourself. It's embarrassing.'

Mind your own business!

011

Before my classmates realised, I swiftly exited the classroom — the fire alarm rang through the length of the corridor as everything descended into chaos, so I had no idea where to run, until Ougi-san burst in coolly with his BMX.

Did he go all the way to the bike racks after he pressed the alarm? How very handy — no, pedally.

Anyway, I virtually flew towards Ougi-san's bike and stood behind him. BMXs can go down staircases (though completely unsafe when there is a passenger at the back), so our escape was plenty speedy.

With an emergency alarm ringing in the school, two people speeding off in a bike only added to the wanton chaos.

If anything, this has basically descended into panic, hasn't it?

If we were unlucky, it could get on the news.

The political pages.

Within the opinion columns.

Although the blame lies less on shikigami Nadeko, and more on Ougi-san… whilst I could not have retrieved that shikigami without his help, so I'd better not talk too much about it, there were many things on my mind.

Many things other than words of gratitude.

But the man himself seemed not to care.

More than that, he started whistling.

After whizzing around the playground for an unnecessary lap and performing a few stunts, Ougi-san and his bike left Public Middle School #701 — really, I was supposed to be the pursuer, now I am running away? What kind of reversal was this? I am even less inclined to go to school now.

If this was my last visit, though, it was not a good way to say farewell.

'Oh my, you look pale, Sengoku-chan. You've clearly managed to capture a shikigami after much effort, and you've made good on your escape; ha-ha, something bad happen to you?'

Said he, in a tone identical to Oshino Meme-san's.

His words, however, were the exact opposite of his.

But the reason I looked pale was not only because I got played by Ougi-san like a fiddle — that feeling of inferiority in front of Fawning Nadeko, that was the main reason.

If I had to say it, I felt like things would be better if I simply disappeared from this earth — although in retrospect, that feeling could be an explanation for oddity caused by shikigami Nadeko, something that affects even myself, their creator.

I hope that was the case.

It is the only thing that keeps me going.

I do not want to think that these embarrassing feelings came from myself. But much as I dispute it, it was undeniable.

The thought of wanting to disappear has not disappeared.

'Stop embarrassing yourself, it's embarrassing.'

Fawning Nadeko's last words were proof that Present Nadeko was not dazzling at all in her eyes. Whilst I did make a timely retort, I was not sure if I could do the same again — could I be as brash as I was next time? I thought as I opened the sheet in my left hand.

In it was an illustration of Fawning Nadeko, in a school uniform.

From three dimensions, sealed into two.

Tamed — huh.

Her clothes were completely different from when I drew her; how unbelievable — I gave a light sigh.

I might be cleaning up my own mess, but this was some heavy baggage — I only managed to get one Nadeko back thanks to Ougi-san's help, but it might be better to leave the remaining three to Ononoki-chan… I'll just slink back to my own room… work on gloomy things…

That said, I had no method of contacting Ononoki-chan. A professional such as Ononoki-chan may carry a mobile phone, but I do not have one.

Such a device is not needed for a hikikomori.

Anyway, having went through great lengths to get one shikigami, I wanted to

relay her some good news — and relieve myself from some of the work.

Right as I said that, something rang — a phone call.

Not a ringtone, but a vibration.

I did not have one; it was, of course, Ougi-san's phone that was ringing — 'excuse me', Ougi-san said, as he took his smartphone out from his pocket in his uniform, and swiped away with his fingertips.

Using it like a natural; high schoolers really are something else.

'Hello, Kanbaru-senpai — mm, I'm on sick leave today. Personal circumstances. No need to worry, I'm not busy choosing Kanbaru-senpai's birthday present. Eh? A riot? Down at Public Middle School #701? What a nuisance. Oh, really… I haven't heard of that middle school 'til now. I've got nothing to do with whatever carnage is going on down there.'

Ougi-san lied without batting an eye.

Though I should say that the panic we caused had speedily made its way to Kanbaru-san's ears — the perpetrator was wearing none other than a Naoetsu High School uniform, so Kanbaru-san, herself a student at Naoetsu High, naturally got wind.

Having said that, I was impressed with her vast network. Her popularity seemed to fly off the charts when she became a senior.

'Wrong person, mate, wrong person. Look, they say there's four people in this world

who look the exact same as yourself — oh? Only three? I remember there being four —'

Ougi-san said as he let out a grin.

I am getting zero hint of respect from this guy towards his popular senpai… he doesn't think of her as someone lower than him, right?

Anyway, with that, Ougi-san dodged his way through Kanbaru-san's questioning.

'Let me take it.'

I said, stretching my arm out.

'Nm?

'You alright with that?' Asked Ougi-san.

I had never had a nice, long chat with Kanbaru-san due to past events; too many past events. Ougi-san probably asked it out of concern — or to entertain himself as he usually does.

Regardless, I only knew I was in year 3, class 5 through Kanbaru-san's work, minimising the damage done (it was the minimum, right?), so I would like to at least thank her.

Not only for that, but also for caring about me.

Nothing else apart from a word of thanks.

…Though the reason why I was thinking like that was probably because, however brief, I had an exchange with the chatty Fawning Nadeko.

'Hello. It's me, Sengoku Nadeko.'

'Oh!! Sengoku-chan! It's been a long while!!'

From the smartphone beamed Kanbaru-san's energetic voice. Her voice did not feel blank, her tone audibly one of concern and caring, probably brought on by me having seen Fawning Nadeko — really thoughtful she is, Kanbaru-san.

Ougi-san pales in comparison, or more to the point, he's the exact opposite!

'Have you been doing well?'

'Good. I'm not dead; I'm alive.'

'That's good. That's great.'

'Sorry about making you worry before. Sorry about still making you worry. But I am on the move. I exist.'

I was not replaced.

There was no time for specifics, so I ended with a 'thank you very much'.

The last time I spoke with Kanbaru-san was early last autumn, so I spoke with some restraint — things have changed, both my tone of voice and from 'Nadeko' to 'I'.

I was no longer the '*kawaii, kawaii*' that Kanbaru-san effused over — I have changed completely; Kanbaru-san's mental image of me was probably closer to Fawning Nadeko than to myself.

Whilst not depressing, you could say I am no longer that Sengoku Nadeko.

The thing that went off, if it must be said, was ultimately the character.

Kanbaru-san then said to me,

'Mm, mm. I don't know what happened, but no need to be polite. I was just doing what I should.'

Without much question, a simple agreement — she's really open; too open; probably on a scale beyond my comprehension.

Kanbaru-san must have changed in this half a year too — yet she still sounded like the Kanbaru-san I knew.

No, she did technically ask me one question.

It was not about me, but Ougi-san.

'By the way, Sengoku-chan, did Ougi-kun really not do anything dodgy? Why are you with him anyway? If he's hanging out with you, a student at Public Middle School #701, that makes me even more suspicious…'

'I-I am a hikikomori who doesn't go to school, why would I be there?'

I lied to the person I have to be grateful to.

A useless ne'er-do-well, I am.

Ougi-san looked at me with the smile of a knowing accomplice — whilst I am conflicted about speaking like Anti-Nadeko, I really wanted to punch that smile off his face.

Whether she willingly fell for it, or noticed there were words I could not say, Kanbaru-san did not ask anything further — thanks for the big help.

Coming back to where we were, things were going along quite surrealistically.

Having thought I would never get the chance to talk with Kanbaru-san, there I was, talking with her; no signs, no mental preparation.

This very opportunity for conversation probably proves a greater purpose behind me and Ononoki-chan making those shikigami.

Moving on, as she helped me, I asked her,

'U-uh, uhm, Kanbaru-san. Sorry if it sounds weird, but have you seen me, somewhere, today?'

If we do meet later on, the more clues I could provide Ononoki-chan the better. Even if Kanbaru-san was not a first-hand witness, given that she knew about Public Middle School #701 this quickly, her information network might have already picked something up.

'Mm? No, nothing of the sort, I've never heard of that either.'

'I-is that so… okay, then, that's alright.'

'Ah, but now that you mention it…'

Kanbaru-san added, as if suddenly reminded of something,

'I personally don't think it's got anything to do with you, Sengoku-chan, but there's been reports everywhere of a middle school girl with fringes going around town half-naked wearing only gym shorts.'

'Kyaa—!'

That's Nadeko, you idiot!

012

Somewhere down the line, after swapping clothes with Fawning Nadeko, Gentle Nadeko ended up with less than a revealing camisole, wandering around town in an unwatchable sight. With so many witnesses, I cannot leave this shikigami to Ononoki-chan alone.

Half-naked wearing only gym shorts?

Hilarious, life-threateningly hilarious.

A hand bra? Is she covering up her breasts with her hands?

Going walkabouts around town whilst handsabreast over her chest?

I have no idea what she was thinking, but please, Gentle Nadeko, think about your future (me)!

I expected hilarity from Ougi-san following this plot advancement, but he proved surprisingly put off.

Not exactly put off, more an 'ahh — I always felt it'd turn out like this' kind of disappointment.

How extremely arbitrary.

I have no idea what you like seeing.

But even so, he seemed willing to help me search around. In the end, whatever one may say about him, he is at least somewhat co-operative.

However, given the situation we were in (a situation that made my face turn white), it seemed we needed to search separately.

To separate from Ougi-san brings me a bit of joy; no, no, this was only something done out of desperation.

'Ah, I've got an idea, Sengoku-chan. I'll give you my notebook, you draw about a hundred Sengoku-chans, and all of us will comb the town for Bloomer Nadeko. How's that sound?'

I think we'll be swamped.

A toxic swamp, nonetheless.

Also, what's with 'Bloomer Nadeko'?

Just because she was wearing nothing but gym shorts, please don't give her a new name… now that I am fifteen, I realised how ridiculous that looked.

And I did not need Ougi-san reminding me how stupid an act that would be.

'Mm~ are you sure it's not someone else though? Instead of Sengoku-chan's shikigami, it could simply be a naturally exhibitionist middle school girl.'

'I don't think middle school girls these days even know what gym shorts are.'

This really was something that could only happen in a manga.

Not the sort of manga I would draw, though.

'Righto. I'm lending you this BMX then. Whilst Sengoku-chan rides around finding her shikigami… I'll get around somehow.'

To lend me his bike, I am ultimately thankful, even if I lack the drive (the muscle power)… I might be no good on a bike, but I cannot be too picky.

This isn't the time to be picky, I have to move quickly.

But one has to wonder what Ougi-san meant by 'getting around some other way'… I hope it does not involve dragging his senpai Kanbaru-san out… though that person is indeed very driven, as far as I know.

The rush was such that I did not discuss much with Ougi-san before we went our separate ways east and west. I know when I see shikigami Nadeko I would use the only thing I have in my arsenal, that is, my sketchbook page, but what is Ougi-san going to do when he sees a shikigami Nadeko?

Well, that person will have a way to deal with it.

Not 'think of a way to deal with it', 'have a way to deal with it'.

His co-operation was something I am infinitely grateful for, though I really would not mind even if he simply left for good.

I cycled on to the place where Kanbaru-san said Bloomer Nadeko, no, Gentle Nadeko was witnessed — I really should not be complaining when I was the one borrowing it, but I think Ougi-san made some custom modifications; this bike was super difficult to handle.

Who cares if one can cycle backwards?

All I wanted was to cycle forwards.

I held onto this thought as I stamped hard on the pedals; as difficult riding this bike was, it was still quicker than running, and soon, I reached a small park.

The park where she was witnessed.

Inscribed on the plaque (?) was '浪白 Park' — with no ruby text on it, I did not know if it was on'yomi like 'Rouhaku Park' or kun'yomi like 'Namishiro Park'.

After all, this was the first time I have been here.

My forgetfulness is not really a secret, not to mention the many blanks in my memory, so I was not actually sure if it was the first time I was here, though at least it was a place I am unfamiliar with — since I was unfamiliar with this place, my shikigami would also be unfamiliar, though in any case, I would likely have no trouble in finding a girl half-naked wearing only gym shorts.

Fawning Nadeko going to the middle school I am in has probably got something to do with the subconscious of its creator, me. But now that I was seen (in an unbearable state) in a place I have never been, that guess was probably not completely correct.

I needed to re-evaluate this.

However, it seems I am a late Nadeko.

Entering the park, I saw no sign of a middle school girl wearing only gym shorts — there was a family with a new-born baby, there were children playing catch, and there was a girl sitting quietly, reading a book on the bench; it's a peaceful sight, not the hellish one that a perverted exhibitionist would cause.

Umm.

Then what kind of sight would Ougi-san be greeted with — if heading here was the wrong decision (or if that pervert had gone away long ago), then I had better reunite with him quick.

However, unlike Fawning Nadeko who based herself in year 3, class 5, wandering Gentle Nadeko seemed to have no place to go. If all I had was witness testimonies, there was no way I could catch up to her.

And she might be wandering, but looking at all testimonies so far, she appears to be moving at considerable velocity — from a purely timeline-based perspective, it'd probably be inaccurate, but Gentle Nadeko was Nadeko before she became a hikikomori, so she should outrun current me.

Perhaps a shikigami never gets tired in the first place.

Even then, I do not have any other clever ideas… I was never clever in the first place.

I really want them to stop running around because they are so hard to find, which might be a conceited wish on my part as the pursuer, but even putting that aside, I really hope Gentle Nadeko doesn't run around in the streets like that. The more time passes, the more irreversible the effects.

This could become Sengoku Nadeko's last walk.

I might never be allowed on the streets again.

Not even in dark, hidden alleyways.

I finally went outside even though I was a hikikomori; I finally went to school even though all I caused was panic, and yet I am ending up with more reasons to become a hikikomori, not fewer.

This current one is the biggest so far.

Well, the only saving grace I can say is that out of all four shikigami Nadekos, Gentle Nadeko was the one whose face is obscured by her fringes…

She carries some anonymity with her.

Obscured Nadeko.

Though for those who witnessed her, their reaction must have been complete bewilderment — gripped with unavoidable panic.

Again.

The panic in the middle school was probably more Ougi-san's fault, but for the shikigami that were now running free, they really were the perfect kindling for some big trouble.

Gentle Nadeko was supposed to be the safest character; what on earth could Anti-Nadeko and Divine Nadeko be up to? My imagination can only go so far.

Ugh, seriously, why did I even think of making shikigami — I am filled with nothing but regret.

Besides, when one thinks about it, there really is not much difference between an aspiring manga artist conjuring shikigami and, as Ononoki-chan first proposed, an

aspiring manga artist going the idol route, is there?

Even as I claim all of them are myselves, in the eyes of manga artists who could not conjure shikigami (which should be most of them), that is still probably plain cheating.

Perhaps the idol manga artist route posed less risk than the one I am currently on, even.

I am also probably deceiving myself over 'giving it my all' — though I can save such reflections for later.

Overthinking like this is more Gentle Nadeko's personality — right now, though, I am Present Nadeko.

No need to think; what I need to do now is act.

Keep searching based on what Kanbaru-san tells me.

Having made a decision, I got back on my bike.

And as that happened —

'Thank goodness! Nadeko-chan, you've finally found some clothes!'

I heard a call from behind.

I turned back, and it was the girl reading on the bench — wearing a rather refreshing bob cut. She was mildly out of breath, sprinting towards me — wait, how did she know my name?

013

Her name was Oikura Sodachi.

Sodachi-onee-chan.

She had a '*Wow!*' kind of feeling to her.

But I have heard of the stories.

I forgot from whom, though it was probably Tsukihi-chan, but the legend goes that having left town around last October (when I was getting to know Kuchinawa-san), Sodachi-onee-chan made her triumphant return on April — the university she is in is also somewhere around here.

Maybe I would not have as a hikikomori, but now that I was outside, chances are I was bound to meet her at some point — but of all times, why now?

To meet Sodachi-onee-chan right as I was searching for my shikigami is some coincidence.

Totally unimaginable.

If I had to say it,

'It'd be better if Sengoku-chan went this way to find Gentle Nadeko. I'm sure it's better. I dunno, it's just a feeling, an intuition. Ha-ha, maybe you'll have a fateful encounter!'

In a manner seen in a magazine's horoscope pages, Ougi-san pushed me mysteriously in the direction of this park — I cannot believe I ended up here having a chat with Sodachi-onee-chan.

The last time I talked to Sodachi-onee-chan must have been over ten years ago —

let's see, I think it was in primary year two; I was about seven then, so it was about eight years ago?

Whilst I was bothering the Araragi household to play with my primary school classmate, Tsukihi-chan (I called her 'Rara-chan' then), Sodachi-onee-chan was the one who lodged in her house.

I say lodge, in reality, I think it was taking refuge.

I was small back then; not until recently did these complex and harrowing circumstances came to light… and when I think about it in detail, Sodachi-onee-chan was constantly holding her knees, huddling away in a corner of the house, never making a sound; I have never really had a chat with her.

I might have never even introduced myself to her — it was only until last year when I learnt of Oikura Sodachi's full name. For her to take the initiative and speak to me was a shock.

Ordinarily, a house guest, a playmate, a younger one at that, would not be something one remembered — yes, that should be the norm.

Even if one did remember, it would be unusual to purposefully make a move and talk to such a child from just a distant glance — unless they last saw that child wandering around half-naked in gym shorts.

'What happened? To endure such cruel, relentless bullying, Nadeko-chan, you have to

tell me everything, okay? I know adults who can be entrusted with matters such as these, need me introduce them to you?'

I felt sincerely cared for.

From that Sodachi-onee-chan.

Sodachi-onee-chan was also no longer the corner-sulking, knee-hugging, 'I wish death upon all of you — preferably before my own' glaring Sodachi-onee-chan of old.

Or even a different person from last year's Sodachi-onee-chan.

Sometime around last October, Sodachi-onee-chan kicked up quite a storm in Naoetsu High School, which I got wind of, but compared to that episode, her compassion right now was something unimaginable.

As I remained dazed, Sodachi-onee-chan let me off the bicycle, held my arm, and took me towards the bench, as she spoke to me gravely.

Nmm…

I've just remembered that Sodachi spent a very long time refusing to go to school during her time at Naoetsu High — her time absent actually outnumbered her time present. To see me in a sweatshirt and sandals frolicking about probably made her sympathetic.

If that was her reaction of me in a sweatshirt, imagine her witnessing me wearing nothing but gym shorts — the 'adults she trusts' were probably government staff, from when she transferred away from this town.

‘S-Sodachi-onee-chan, I should be the one asking, what are you doing…’

I might be in a bind no matter how you look at it, and I was of course overjoyed and grateful to receive such compassion, but there was no way to start explaining my situation.

No words I could say.

Because unlike Ougi-san, the nephew of specialist Oshino Meme-san, Sodachi-onee-chan knows nothing about oddities — when she sheltered under the roof of the Araragi house, that legendary vampire was a long time away from visiting this town.

Sodachi-onee-chan is someone who has nothing to do with oddities.

‘Ah, s-sorry, I called you Sodachi-onee-chan, like I used to…’

This wouldn’t do, I was faking that intimacy.

It would be fine to think it, to reminisce about it in my head, but it would not be fine to speak it.

Calling someone else with such a close title as ‘onii-chan’ or ‘onee-chan’ is more a characteristic of Gentle Nadeko.

I could not afford to overlap with my shikigami’s personality.

‘That’s okay, I’m fine with that. That aside… what’s with those odd clothes of yours?’

Odd clothes?

She probably meant the gym shorts.

Should I tell her about that protected historic relic from Kanbaru-san… well, if the gym shorts were the reason why I could get close to her, then I do not know where to begin crying with joy.

'Ahh, me? I always feel like I couldn't fit in in uni, so I'm reading on my own. Leave of absence, as it's known.'

It seemed she can say no to classes in university too.

Always feel like she couldn't fit in… for that vague a reason?

I know I should not say this, as the one being cared for, but shouldn't Sodachi-onee-chan take care of herself too?

'I think it was around year one of high school, when I started stopping by this park often — it's close to Senjougahara-san's place… ah, Nadeko-chan probably doesn't know who that is.'

I do.

We almost fought to the death.

That was when I was Divine Nadeko — allow me to rephrase that; the one who could pose a challenge to a deified Sengoku Nadeko with mere flesh and bone, that's who Senjougahara Hitagi-san was.

She lives nearby?

If that was the case, I cannot help but feel nervous.

Ah, no, that person now lives in the Tamikura Apartments — whilst I do not know where that is, I knew that name from our previous conflict.

Did Sodachi just say year one of high school?

Then Senjougahara-san probably moved out some time after that — I say that, she is still probably living somewhere in this town; if this search for these scattered Sengoku Nadekos continued, I might encounter her sooner or later.

I could imagine that worst-case scenario of Senjougahara-san seeing Bloomer Nadeko.

I'm not having that. Never.

Thus, to avoid that scenario, I must find a way to deal with the shikigami problem as soon as possible…

However, getting away from Sodachi-onee-chan's compassion was not going to be easy. Even without that, I too was finding it difficult to simply leave this bench I was sitting on.

The reason I say that was because Sodachi-onee-chan *directly* witnessed Gentle Nadeko — all the information I had right now about that freakish perverted exhibitionist was from Kanbaru-san, but if all goes well, I could extract more information *directement*.

The whereabouts of half-naked me in gym shorts (speaking of, if Bloomer Nadeko was wearing gym shorts, has she got shoes on too? If she was running around dressed like that but with normal shoes on, then that perv scale can only go up), her current appearance, if I could get these hints from Sodachi-onee-chan, then I should be able to narrow down my search.

But I cannot say anything about oddities towards Sodachi-onee-chan — even if it was limited to conjuring shikigami.

One reason being she would not believe a word, and another reason being from Oshino Meme-san: 'encountering oddities pulls one towards oddities'.

Put simply, the moment one hears of aberrational tales, the moment one is infiltrated by such aberrations (thinking back, that 'curse' that plagued Public Middle School #701 probably worked the same way), so if my lips were loose, I could get Sodachi-onee-chan, an unknowing, innocent bystander with no relation towards oddities, involved.

Even from what little I know, Sodachi-onee-chan has lived through wave after wave of indescribable suffering. Considering her rollercoaster of a life, for her to enrol in university (even though she is skipping classes now) is a miracle of itself.

It is a miracle I do not want to ruin.

I cannot ruin this by divulging, from a certain perspective, my own laughable private matters.

I say private matters, it was nonetheless an emergency for me.

I cannot just leave Sodachi-onee-chan with an abrupt farewell.

Fawning Nadeko, who values human relationships, might give up by now (and chat about some flowery drivel; I guarantee it!),

but I am Present Nadeko, and I am self-serving!

In other words, my task was to extract information about Gentle Nadeko with the premise that I completely keep secret my own troubles — quite the impossibly difficult quest.

As much as I genuinely do not wish for my close childhood acquaintance to mistake me for a middle school girl prone to exhibitionist debauchery, I must remain patient.

I had also thought of bluffing her with a twin sister, but this probably would not work with someone I spent my childhood with.

Right, but how should I approach this… this was, after all, a reunion eight years in the making, and practically the first time we could have a proper chat — unlike Ougi-san, this was a true 'first meeting'.

It is not difficult to imagine one or two mistakes leading to an embarrassing silence.

All it takes is an order to go to work, and my communication skills go haywire; this was a difficult situation to be in. Ideally, Sodachi-onee-chan would volunteer that information about Gentle Nadeko, but there is only so much one can wish for.

If I put that question poorly, and Sodachi-onee-chan gets suspicious, I do not believe that I could hide the truth from her. Being bad at communication automatically means being bad at hiding secrets.

…Though thinking about it this much was also pointless.

With a brain like mine, I'd be better off praying it would go well — it's all right, if I fail, Ononoki-chan or Ougi-san would help me fill the gaps.

But Ononoki-chan aside, Ougi-san's whereabouts is making me very uncomfortable…

'U-uh… Sodachi-onee-cha—… no, Oikura-san…'

'I told you, I'm fine with you calling me like you used to. Even I wouldn't want you to call me Euler. I miss this… I'm glad that you remembered me.'

? — She just told me something I did not know (Euler, erm… he's some famous mathematician, right?).

But the words 'I'm glad that you remembered me' don't seem to be patronising words for a slightly nutty childhood playmate, but from deep within Sodachi-onee-chan's heart.

I'm glad that you remembered me.

It'd be painful if I were forgotten.

Something completely ordinary, yet still shocking.

Did Sodachi-onee-chan think that too?

…Anybody who knows what happened last year would describe Sodachi-onee-chan as an ultra-thin, fragile sheet of glass. A panel that shattered with a touch, though when it shatters, it does not end well for the hand doing the shattering either.

But to me, from this conversation, Sodachi-onee-chan seemed someone strong and resilient.

Perhaps not resilient?

Like the frame of a bicycle that twists and deforms for shock absorption — otherwise, to live as she is now would be something beyond what oddities can do.

An act of self-harm for the sake of self-protection.

An impression that does not waver even with this coincidental face-to-face encounter — no, based on that, Sodachi-onee-chan is fairer and kinder than the rumours had suggested.

Could it be that Bloomer Nadeko could soften the hardest of hearts? After all, even Ougi-san was put off.

As I thought about it, it was a kindness that scared me a little, but I will call her 'Sodachi-onee-chan' for now.

'Y-you've cut your hair, Sodachi-onee-chan.'

Using hairstyles as a conversation starter; go me. The last time I met Sodachi-onee-chan was when she was in primary school, so it's only obvious she has changed her hairstyle since then.

With that question, however, I had dug my own grave.

'Mm. Well, I cut it when I entered university. A change of image and all that — it didn't work though.'

She spoke of her failure without a hitch;

'Anyways, speaking of hairstyles, I should be asking you, Nadeko-chan. It's good that you've found some clothes to wear, but I've only just noticed, what's *that* with your head?'

Sodachi-onee-chan said as she leant in.

Oh right.

I could not see it myself, so I often forget about it, but Present Nadeko's hairstyle is a very short one I cannot see (another reason I cut it short was because it was getting in the way of me drawing, so it is normal for me not to see it) — conversely, Gentle Nadeko was the one who would get called Lady Forelocks.

The shock of seeing Bloomer Nadeko, and the comfort of seeing her with clothes not long after. Such a difference made Sodachi-onee-chan ignore that, which means to her, I not only found clothes to wear, but cut my hair all of a sudden.

'It's like it got chewed off… you really have to speak out. I can tell you from experience that staying silent does absolutely nothing.'

Chewed off.

I cut it myself, so it's no wonder it's trimmed unevenly.

'I-it's okay. I am not being bullied.'

'Really? I guess you like running around like that then?'

'Y-yes, I like doing it.'

My talking served only to worsen the misconception.

'I see… so that's a hobby… hmmm… well, everybody has their thing, I guess.'

My thing has gotten me into big trouble.

Talk about boasting one's faults — although it probably wasn't boasting, but flashing.

I have sacrificed this much just to avoid mentioning oddities to Sodachi-onee-chan; with that, I do not feel so guilty about me lying anymore.

Or maybe I was still enamoured with the idea of 'giving it one's all'? A sacrifice on this scale finally warranting me to forgive myself —

'Nadeko-chan, I feel like you're somehow different.'

'Different'?

Not 'difficult'?

'No, I mean I don't want to talk about my primary school days either, but I remember you being more… y'know, that.'

She minced her words. Out of kindness.

But I can hear what she is trying to say.

Loud and clear.

'Well, I don't know what happened in between, but I guess showing yourself to the world counts as some kind of growth?'

When she said 'showing myself', was she talking about the fringes? Or the gym shorts? Or something else? I could not tell.

If she was talking about what happened in between, well, let's just say I became a god.

Where on earth is Divine Nadeko…

'I didn't manage to grow up like that — I couldn't shed my image. I've entered uni, cut my hair, and began living on my own, but in

the end, I'm still me. Still endlessly nostalgic, still reading books in this park. Going places just to come back where I started; that's pretty much the same as doing nothing.'

She said with a pretend air of self-deprecation, but I think she was trying to console me as well — perhaps Sodachi-onee-chan still believes I was bullied.

But I guess this is what life does to people; being a university student four years my senior, her words carry a certain refined weight. She may say she's 'still her', but for a middle schooler, a university student's words ring truer than most.

No, don't I know this?

But now was not the time to ask Sodachi-onee-chan about what life has in store — these were urgent times.

However, as a truant child now, facing Sodachi-onee-chan who led a hikikomori life for two whole years, who then managed to return to normal society, I cannot resist asking her for some advice.

Even though the thing I should be asking is the whereabouts of Gentle Nadeko — though I could not see how I could turn this conversation around yet, this does not seem a bad place to land on now.

It was just a bit too heavy a subject for an opening talk.

'U-uh… Sodachi-onee-chan. I'm, not, going to school at all, these days.'

'Mm'

Sodachi-onee-chan raised her eyebrows.

That look on her face, that *look* on her *face*.

Her eyes spoke pure malice.

If this was what she looks like when she was genuinely worried, then it is no surprise she gets mistaken all the time.

'It's not because of bullying, erm, my class went through some disastrous trouble… I did something really bad, so I don't want to go back.'

I will skip over the details. They have to do with oddities after all.

Technically, I did visit school just now, and did something really bad once again, but I will leave that out too — I do not want her to see me as a delinquent, just as I do not want her to see me as a pervert.

'Oh. So you've heard as well? That's why you're bringing this up with me? Well, you're not wrong at all. I felt the same then.'

She somehow seemed to have figured out, without going too deep, as Sodachi-onee-chan showed her sensitive side and agreed.

This was me getting close all of a sudden, I thought it would be something she hated… but Sodachi-onee-chan might be someone who treats her juniors well in the first place.

'So it's all right, Nadeko-chan. It's kinda fate that we met here, so I guarantee you. Just 'cos you can't go to school doesn't mean your life is over.'

She said decidedly.

Oh boy, it felt really cool.

Was what I thought; then,

‘Yes… it’s really not over… it’s far from over, this life… just how long does this have to go on…’

She murmured.

I heard that.

Instead of saying she treats her juniors well, it might be more apt to say Sodachi-onee-chan likes looking cool in front of her juniors — then, I will pretend I did not notice that at all.

This is from Fawning Nadeko, so I had better learn.

‘Was it your parents, Nadeko-chan? But I remember them treating you so well…’

She even remembers the details clear as day.

Even if she remembers, I could not be happy about it.

That is, to have left such an impression speaks to how terrible my parents are… which reminds me, this was something Kaiki-san said too.

Quite the indictment if it came from a swindler.

‘Mm… I couldn’t go to high school, so they told me to start making a living… go get a job, something of the sort. But I can’t do that. I think they’re just putting me on the spot with something so impossible… I don’t know what I should do…’

So I made four shikigami.

I did not say that out loud, of course.

I will also keep my wish of becoming a manga artist to myself here — it might not be

something worth hiding, but it was not something I was eager to declare either.

Besides, from the mood, Sodachi-onee-chan does not seem the type who reads manga.

To announce the dreams one is pursuing is to leave out all other paths, to back oneself into a corner; being content with that declaration alone poses a kind of horror.

This horror has some similarities with the horror that stems from being content with mere effort.

But all that resulted from me being silent with the details was —

'I see. Not knowing what to do results in you streaking around and yanking off all your long hair…'

— Sodachi-onee-chan's acceptance.

Ouch.

I did not yank them off though.

I used scissors, but not the shears used by hairdressers.

'I say this with a dose of self-criticism; Nadeko-chan, you should think more seriously about how you take such stern words. Back when I'm in middle school, I tended to take every advice I got seriously… couldn't really take teases or plain banter as they were… honestly, that still hasn't changed much these days, but I don't think this is right.'

'…Do you mean my parents weren't serious about having me get a job?'

'Not necessarily. But I don't think they're being tough on you just for the sake of it — for someone they've treated, and continue to treat so well, these harsh words could be more directed towards themselves.'

What a fresh way of looking at things.

Were these sudden harsh words the result of 'raising a useless daughter', an act of self-flagellation, of self-punishment? — I never thought of it that way, but upon hearing that, I think there was at least a possibility that is true.

It was definitely not lashing out, though.

'If they treat their daughter as part of themselves, then this doesn't really set a good example… aah, sorry. You don't want to hear someone bad-mouthing your parents, do you?'

'Ah, um —'

I did not have anything to say.

Frankly, someone bad-mouthing my parents was, if anything, quite cathartic — upon hearing what Sodachi-onee-chan had to say, I had a better idea of what my parents were feeling.

To care for me to this extent, this person really is a pro in human relationships; completely not like a former hikikomori.

Fawning Nadeko's hollow reaction is making me ashamed now.

I wonder if she is reading Psychology in university.

'Nope, Mathematics～'

I had no idea that department even existed.

The world is full of things I do not know.

Even if I did, to miscalculate ten thousand hours probably means this is the closest I will get to that department.

'Putting self-criticism aside, allow me to offer some advice *not* based on my past; don't treat these harsh words as all your parents really are. They could be having a bad day before they said those words, and even if they meant it, they could change their minds the next day — perhaps they're already regretting it. They might be asking you to start making ends meet, but perhaps what they really wanted to say, but couldn't, is for you to go to high school. Maybe it's because they couldn't say it that they've compensated with heavy-handedness, hoping that could convince you. Never take anything at face value; look clearly at *who*'s doing the talking — otherwise, even if you followed their words with complete servility, you could still end up upsetting them. To upset them whilst thinking you're right… that'd be a tragic relationship.'

I am glad I got such advice, but what makes me gladder is seeing Sodachi-onee-chan not laugh off such trifling matters so common amongst children; she may say she was not taking it personally, but still she thinks through my problems as her own.

It was advice I did not take at the moment, but to treat me like this shows that Sodachi-

onee-chan really cares for her juniors. Maybe it is because she could not be kind to herself, that she places this kindness on me, someone who reminds her of her past.

Then I must take this kindness to heart — it is for Sodachi-onee-chan too.

'It's alright, Nadeko-chan. You can fret about your future all you want, but as long as you keep on living, you'll grow into adulthood,

'So don't you worry.'

As Sodachi-onee-chan finished her sentence, she put out her hand as if by second nature, and softly pat my head — it's the first time this has ever felt that comfortable to me.

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In the end, I did not get any information on where Gentle Nadeko was from Sodachi-onee-chan. More specifically, I realised during our exchange that nothing would come even if I did ask her about it.

An explanation: it took a long time for someone as asocial as myself to piece together bits of our conversation, and conclude that Sodachi-onee-chan also called out my name when she saw Gentle Nadeko with her hand bra (a courageous act), but she dashed away as soon as that happened.

Gentle Nadeko-san, please, anything but dashing around with a hand bra.

What state were those breasts in, exactly?

I forgot when, but there was one time when Hanekawa-san called out my name outside Naoetsu High School, and I dashed away identically; if she was trying to re-enact that sequence, then to run after her would be quite meaningless.

Unlike Fawning Nadeko running towards Public Middle School #701, Gentle Nadeko's sprint was purely to run away from Sodachi-onee-chan.

Where she runs was simply a matter of convenience, without any special consideration or route in mind.

No rules nor strategy.

If Gentle Nadeko knew it was Sodachi-onee-chan who called after her, perhaps she

would react differently — no, she would have reacted the exact same way.

That introverted girl's fundamental principle was to 'dash away if she hears someone call after her'.

If she could run away from Hanekawa-san in her angelic phase, then she could run away from anybody.

If possible, I would have wanted Sodachi-onee-chan to keep her distance and observe where Bloomer Nadeko would, or wanted to go, but I would be asking for too much.

That Gentle Nadeko might come back made Sodachi-onee-chan wait for me at the park whilst reading; from that alone, I really should express my deepest thanks (from Sodachi-onee-chan's perspective, everything went as she expected; looks like she completely predicted the situation as she read her books).

'I was gonna skip school for the day, but after chatting with you, Nadeko-chan, I feel a bit more motivated now. I wonder if I should go back this afternoon…'

I do not remember motivating Sodachi-onee-chan, but if I have managed to perk her up some way as well, then I'm really happy. My clumsy talk was not for naught, after all.

Sodachi-onee-chan left me her contact details in the end.

'Whenever you find yourself in trouble, I could always help you out; Nadeko-chan, never ever take it lying down. Give me a shout and I'll let 'em know true pain.'

She made it sound terrifying.

Even though that suspicion of bullying never went away, I should call it a day.

And, speaking of efforts not for naught, my talking did not go completely unrewarded — in addition to the advice, I also had a hint.

It may have been eight years since I met Oikura-san, and it might have been a deep conversation, but like two minds working as one, both of us avoided a certain topic.

Our topic almost began revolving somewhere *around there*, and were it not for Sodachi-onee-chan heading off to university and ending the conversation there, we might have actually drifted *there*… but there seemed to be an implicit understanding to not mention a certain mutual acquaintance.

Karen-san's name got mentioned, Tsukihi-chan's name got mentioned, but the name of the eldest son in the Araragi family was not — yes.

It was like an evasion.

It was like a tease.

We avoided naming that person.

Going round and round — wandering around.

…From what Kanbaru-san said, the flurry of witnesses of Gentle Nadeko came from *everywhere* — regarding this loitering, it can be surmised that she had no sense of a goal, no sense of destination; she just goes around (half-naked) without a care — such was the first explanation; the second explanation was that she was *avoiding the destination she*

really wanted to go to, resulting in it looking like she was wandering around (half-naked) somewhere other than that place.

Therefore, one should not investigate each sighting one by one — given all these locations, put them together, and find their centre point (like in maths).

Could the co-ordinates be the Araragi household?

SENGOKU NADEKO

015

Honestly, I never imagined the day I would be back here again.

For the school, I am still enrolled there; even without today's incident, I might return there for some admin or other, whether I wanted to or not — but, even though it is practically next to where I live, even though it is a home my friends live in, if this had not happened, I would probably have never set foot in the Araragi household for the rest of my life.

Even Tsukihi-chan, someone who accidentally throws away her delicacy the day the bins get collected, even she can find the time to visit, but since I have stopped stepping out of my room, she has not invited me to her place.

Even today, when I was running after the four Sengoku Nadekos, I must have subconsciously avoided going near the Araragi house — that was why Gentle Nadeko could have been thinking along the same lines; there is sound reasoning behind such a theory.

Furthermore, to hide in a place the pursuer is unlikely to approach does not, from the escapee's point of view, feel wrong — given that, although I might not be beating them at their own game, if I were to set up an ambush there first, I think there is a high chance I can catch Gentle Nadeko.

That was the most I can extract from my own daft head.

Well, it was only contrived to justify the idea that suddenly appeared…

With that, I stepped back on Ougi-san's bike, and went directly towards the Araragi household, though as I raced against that headwind and arrived, the thought of 'hmm, but is that really the case' kept nagging me.

My not-exactly-bright head had a decent idea for once, so I went with it. But Gentle Nadeko trying to approach the Araragi house yet never reaching it was what my deduction implied; if I went forward, not only would I be first, but that kid would probably never come.

This is Gentle Nadeko we are talking about, right?

I wonder what would happen.

If my thoughts of 'never getting near the Araragi household' were what I have in common with Gentle Nadeko — just as Fawning Nadeko did not go to my year 2 class, but to year 3, class 5 — then between Sodachi-onee-chan's 'showing myself to the world' me and 'introverted and timid' me, which me would possess a stronger feeling of 'I do not want to be here'?

Even with a heavy heart, I still got there, so even with a time difference, this should be within Gentle Nadeko's ability eventually; at least, that was what I thought…

However, that self of mine could have decided to something completely unexpected. That doubt still lingered within me.

Please don't tell me there was no point in coming here.

I do not want to leave empty-handed.

The only thing I can rely on was something I cannot imagine happening again today: the curious but real image of me inside the Araragi household, half-naked, wearing only gym shorts — therefore, whilst reasoning that Gentle Nadeko would come here was rather forced, I had to be forced, given the situation.

I stepped off the difficult bike, and looked upwards towards the Araragis' house — of course it would be, but nothing has changed since the last time I was there.

I do not miss it at all.

Whilst it was about the same gap, this felt different from being absent in middle school — this may seem a strange metaphor, but this felt like a field trip to an ancient castle.

One does feel a sense of history, but it was one divorced from my current self, a history that bears no relevance — no, this was merely using some other words to replace 'missing' the place.

Or 'poignancy', for that matter.

It was probably protecting myself from those wounds that have cut so deep.

Anyway, what is fortunate for me is that I am not bathing in a sea of thankfulness — whether divorcing past events from my

current self was the right thing to do, I can leave for another time.

I should focus on setting up an ambush, against my past self.

Ambush.

Considering the possibility of being found out by the Araragis, I have to find somewhere nearby to hide… it was a normal weekday, so everybody should be at work or in school, but the Araragis could do something out of the ordinary.

I shall rely on my experience; my painful experience.

Well, having them spot Present Nadeko is still better than having them spot Bloomer Nadeko… mm?

As I was pondering on what to do whilst loitering around the front gate of the Araragi household, I noticed something. I noticed a little something.

The entryway. The front door of that entryway.

An odd sight visible from afar, that was what was near the doorknob — no no, I must remain calm.

Perhaps I saw things wrong.

When something happens that defies logic, one must look closer for confirmation.

I leant the bike by the front door, and entered the Araragis' property. Unlike stepping inside the middle school, this moment marked the time when I committed trespassing, though by the looks of it, that was *already happening*.

Yes.

My ambush might have come too late — from the Araragi household's front door.

Around where the doorknob was, there was a hole just big enough for a human wrist to fit in — a hole had been opened.

'……'

I heard that this is a method burglars use for getting around crescent locks in windows… but this was the first time I have seen it used to pry open a heavy wooden door.

And besides, this hole was not neatly cut out — it looked like some wild beast clawing or biting out a hole; it was crudely dug through.

Ononoki-chan revealed that she had destroyed the Araragis' front gate about a year ago with her 'Unlimited Rulebook'… but to be destroyed twice in a year, what *is* with this house?

Having known Tsukihi-chan, I knew this long ago, but what was surprising was that, of all things, the couple living here are police officers?

But, even knowing that, even being familiar with that, I still needed to trespass even further — because.

Upon closer inspection, the hole in the door was holed out not with claws or fangs, but with a chisel.

A chisel.

Yes, a chisel.

I thought I got there first, but that was not the case.

It seemed that before I thought of it, Gentle Nadeko had already decided to come to visit the Araragi household — I wonder if that meant frustrated Present Nadeko was the more indecisive one?

Was this part of her character?

Of course, this could be the work of an entirely unrelated burglar, but to use a chisel to break through the front gate was not exactly the wisest move (instead of wasting energy on that, breaking in via the window would have been a hundred times faster), so this can be considered further proof that this was the work of my oblivious shikigami.

I cannot let this go on any longer.

My shikigami that looks like my double has started doing crimes — technically, it had already happened when she wandered around half-naked, but destroying property and trespassing goes beyond being excusable.

Obviously, if she hurts anybody in the process as well…

This would be more than what Fawning Nadeko did.

Gentle Nadeko isn't gentle at all, is she.

I prayed that nobody was in the Araragi household, as I carefully and silently opened the front door, now uselessly dangling and only fixed by its hinges, and stepped inside, removing my shoes.

This bitch…

Dragging people into a life of crime.

Although, when I think about it, such complaints probably don't make much sense — middle school Sengoku Nadeko trespassing into the Araragi household was, after all, not the first time it had been done.

Last October, no, it was already November by then, I slipped into the empty Araragi household just like now — whilst not with a chisel through the front door, Gentle Nadeko's acts were at least somewhat consistent.

A child returning their parents' debts.

In my case though, it was more the child not knowing their parents' hearts — no, as an actual daughter, I could say the same for myself.

Given that it is a feeling I more or less know now, I should talk with my parents properly once this saga reaches its conclusion… I thought back to what Sodachi-onee-chan said to me, escaping reality once again as I always do with thinking, as I walked up the stairs.

Tip-toeing my way.

It might be somebody's house that I am familiar with, but a long gap between visits really makes it feel like somebody else's home — but so far, I do not feel there was anybody else in the house.

There were no other shoes down by the front door, so I am not surprised by that; everybody in the Araragi family seems to have gone out… consider it a bit of luck.

I guess even I get visited by Lady Luck from time to time.

Gentle Nadeko's shoes were nowhere to be seen, though given that witnesses said she was moving around half-naked, I was not sure if she had shoes on in the first place — and, even though I took my sandals off, in trespassing, the trespasser obediently removing their shoes by the front door is not a given.

Naturally, even though I was sneaking like this, Gentle Nadeko could have left a long time ago — although that depends on what she was up to in the Araragi household in the first place.

I reached the upper floor, walking alongside the corridor — around someone else's home like the back of my hand. Going past Tsukihi-chan and Karen-san's shared room — though I'm not sure about that; Karen-san might have gotten her own room since entering high school — I stopped in front of the door at the very end.

The room I visited oh-so-many times.

The room I visited in so many forms.

…The room I should not be visiting right now, but seeing as I *did* go half-naked wearing only gym shorts in this room, then if Gentle Nadeko was still in this house, this was the first place I should look.

Perhaps… I should knock first?

Or maybe I should set up a sneak attack, sealing Gentle Nadeko before she had any

time to react — if I could not catch her now, then I do not know what else I could do.

I took out the sheet of paper from my pocket, and had a small deep breath. Ougi-san was not by my side this time; I'll have to face this alone — here I go.

Ready, set!

016

I was the one who got set up.

No, I managed to dodge, but only barely.

Probably due to architectural considerations, the door to this room thankfully opens outwards — compared to doors that open in, there will be a slight delay in entering the room.

It was this slight delay that saved my life.

I stumbled as I charged into the room, and saw the sheen of a blade — a V-gouge.

'Ooer!'

Considering the scene, I let out a weird cry and thumped down on the ground. It sounds painful from the onomatopoeia alone, but I will say it was the result of my reflexes.

Like exercising on a mat, I got up after rolling on the floor, as I shot a look at the other person with the gouge in the room. Surprisingly, although it was Nadeko, it was not Gentle Nadeko.

Her fringes were extremely short.

Yes, it was Anti-Nadeko.

'Tch — dodging an attack from yours truly when you're slower than a constipated shit, huhhh!?'

Her eyes and tone were unhinged, dissonant, her eyebrows raised, her smirk as twisted as her lips, impatiently stomping on the floor repeatedly, having a standoff with me.

This goes beyond a delinquent student.

This was a rogue.

As aforementioned, to differentiate her from the three other shikigami, not only did I give her a different hairstyle, I also gave Anti-Nadeko her own clothes, in her case only a yukata.

The one that Tsukihi-chan wore often, the one I borrowed as pyjamas when my fringes were slashed by her (thinking back to the atmosphere then, I also gave her a hair tie) — she also wore wooden clogs.

It was to complement the kimono then, but if I knew Anti-Nadeko would illegally trespass a house without taking her shoes off *and* stomp recklessly on the floor, I probably would have drawn her bare-footed.

Or with a pair of tap shoes.

Dragging this back, with Anti-Nadeko spreading her feet wide and squatting down with a V-gouge, plus her very Japanese kimono, it was a pose that screamed a yakuza member's formal self-introduction.

It was a bit funny, even with the situation at hand.

No, with her pointing her chisel at me, I could not possibly laugh — but the questions finally caught up with the chaos.

Hey, why was Anti-Nadeko here?

Wasn't she the meanest of all Sengoku Nadekos?

Well, I have to catch every Sengoku Nadeko in the end, so even though it was Anti-Nadeko who was in here and not Gentle

Nadeko, it was still alright, as far as outcomes go…

Besides, compared to if the room's occupant *was* here, this chance meeting was something I very much welcomed.

However, it was clear that Anti-Nadeko attempted to ambush me.

I thought I was the one doing the ambush, but it turns out I was the one who got ambushed.

Since this was a full pursuit, if not a retrieval mission, I expected some amount of resistance from my shikigami (Fawning Nadeko's 'human barrier', as Ougi-san said, was also some form of self-defence), but I was not expecting this resistance to carry an air of murder.

You have got to be kidding me, right?

Aren't onmyōji and shikigami master and servant?

No, I am no onmyōji, and as Ononoki-chan said, some were replaced by their shikigami — could Anti-Nadeko be trying to do the same with violence and realism?

Is she really trying to replace me?

I probably should not say this myself, but am I really worth replacing? No good would come of it, surely?

'Grrrrr…'

Anti-Nadeko growled.

I don't remember setting her character like that.

She has leapt off the author's leash.

I hope she doesn't roam free and become some wild animal.

'Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off… *I* am *never* gonna work a single fucking minute… making *me* do your pissing job, fat fucking chance, huhhh!?'

'……'

It was for a far simpler reason.

Not to replace anything, but simply refusing to labour.

Which reminds me, I nearly forgot with all these intervening events, but the thing that got me into this mess was because I wanted to divide the effort needed to become a manga artist, which resulted in me making four shikigami.

At the same time, that was also the reason why they escaped my room, but considering that for them, the consequence of being captured was forced labour, then the fact that anything goes for these Nadekos is no longer a surprise.

An offence is the best defence.

Anti-Nadeko was especially feisty.

Considering she once destroyed a classroom door with a roundhouse kick — well, I should have recognised that damage on that gate as Anti-Nadeko's doing.

Really slow, I was.

'I-it's okay. Anti-Nadeko. I-I won't force you to go to work… or tell you to work ten thousand hours…'

I tried to negotiate, whilst also trying to stand —

‘Shut your fucking gob, you’re not fooling me for a fucking second! I’m gonna fucking kill you and get some fucking rest when I’m done, huhhh!?’

The V-gouge had at some point turned into a skew chisel — and was swung right towards my heart.

She really hates work, doesn’t she.

Or maybe *I* was originally like that?

Is that what would happen if I set the character to back then?

In any case, I failed to stand up, and rolled on the floor like a woodlouse — this was not a big room to begin with, and I soon hit the wheel of an office chair.

It was quite painful. But not as painful as getting shanked by a chisel.

Looking closely, the skew chisel that was swung was now stabbed firmly into the carpet — a power unimaginable from a middle school girl with feeble wrists.

This, I am afraid, is a characteristic of Anti-Nadeko.

If Fawning Nadeko’s characteristic as a shikigami aberration is sociability and manipulation (when thinking about it, thank goodness she was the first one I dealt with; it was an extraordinarily powerful ability), then Anti-Nadeko’s characteristic as a shikigami aberration would likely be a removed limiter on her physical strength.

Otherwise, a hole like that could not normally be dug with a mere chisel — as I

analysed coolly, I positioned myself one chair away from Anti-Nadeko.

I may not be able to put up a human barrier, but a chair barrier can do.

I ducked for cover behind the back of the office chair (it felt like reloading in a shooter game), and braced myself for this continued confrontation with Anti-Nadeko.

The chisel seemed stuck on the floor, so she grabbed a new blade — a round gouge.

I hate being stabbed by any blade, but amongst all chisels, the round gouge is the one I hate the most… it might have been out of desperation, and the knife I was most familiar with in middle school, but only until now did I seriously reflect on the many, many snakes I have severed with that tool.

Only now — and also for the first time.

I saw the harm I did.

Although I am still unsure why exactly I did that, it was something I regret doing. This confrontation with Anti-Nadeko seemed to have gained an extra meaning.

Mm?

But this is strange, no?

The one who slaughtered small animals with a chisel should be Gentle Nadeko — the most Anti-Nadeko would have had was a garden trowel, right? No, even then, I still don't want to be shivved by a garden trowel…

Could it be that, after exchanging uniforms, Gentle Nadeko had her weapons taken away from her as well?

If the other three Nadekos robbed everything they can and left her with nothing but gym shorts on the street, then I really feel sorry for Gentle Nadeko.

Even I would think this was bullying.

Bullied by myself (myselves), no less.

I have to guard her as soon as possible.

Or should I say, I have to cut through this.

If I don't cut through, I'll get cut through!

'Calm down, just, have a chat. Put that dangerous thing on the ground first, okay? Ch-chisels aren't supposed to be used like this, wouldn't you say?'

'Huhhh!?'

I covered myself with the chair, as I tried my best at consolation, but Anti-Nadeko's anger only rose further.

'What's this fucking tool for then, huhhh! What good is a round gouge for other than splitting your fucking guts!?'

Scary.

She said she would split my guts.

The wide-open yukata really made her look the part; if it wasn't for this mildly ridiculous image, I would have frozen with fear from that ferocity.

No, she's making it sound ridiculous too.

I had never thought of it that way, but back when Anti-Nadeko gave everybody a good talking-to in that year 2 classroom, this must have been what my classmates felt.

This must have what it looked like.

It was frightening all right, but it was also dramatic, exaggerated… the person might

have been serious, but the more serious they were, the more farcical it ends up.

'I-it's a tool for making things. Chisels are for creating…'

'Creating!? So you *are* making me work, aren't you, you swine!? Huhhh!?'

Please, listen to what people have to say first.

It was a painful lesson on the hardships of communication — forming a team of yourselves would make it easy; Ononoki-chan's proposal now rings so, so hollow. If I am like this with my own shikigami, if this continues, I could never make it into society.

Convincing such an agitated Anti-Nadeko would probably be a challenge even for the erudite Kaiki-san… however, even though I am using a sheet of paper for capturing, my opponent is wielding a blade.

Fighting blade with sheet — to wit, fighting scissor with paper.

I am going to lose, aren't I?

Of course, we were not playing rock, paper, scissors in the first place… having been a hikikomori, Present Nadeko's wrists have only gone weaker; compared to the delimited power character that is Anti-Nadeko, I cannot hope to match her.

My hands were empty too.

There was no contest.

But I wonder what would happen if I did get stabbed.

Perhaps, as a middle schooler, Tsukihi-chan would return home first, and find my

dismembered body — even Tsukihi-chan would probably be mortified by this sight.

No, what would happen is, given the body is in this room, the room's occupant would naturally be the first one to find me — then,

Then it would be very bad either way.

Even in the sense of taboos.

'Eyah!'

The chair's back which I have so far used to guard myself, I pushed towards Anti-Nadeko with both hands.

It has wheels, so even without a lot of muscle power, it gains velocity quickly if one uses both hands.

'Huhhh!?'

Much as Anti-Nadeko was not listening to me, she would have to react to this — I say that, it was a chair approaching her, after all; something cushiony like that would do little damage.

She waved her empty left hand and flicked away the chair — good, for the chair was merely my distraction.

Since she could only use her left hand, she should flick that chair towards her left, so whilst she pushes the chair away, I am going to approach her from her right.

This is fine.

I have done this before, so I am sure of it.

A chisel might be sharp, and having used it a lot, I know how painful being cut by it would be, so it seems unnecessarily dangerous, but to use it as a murder weapon

would be infeasible, thanks to how short the blade is.

Assuming!

Assuming the tip does cut through me, a few centimetres will not stab through my hypodermis — my guts won't be spilled. Though I am not exactly full of fat, let's hope for the best!

'If you want a break that much — I'll give you one!'

I let out a battle cry, trying to encourage myself, as I attempted to catch her with my sketchbook page.

Sadly, my twig-like legs did not move at the speed I hoped they would. If this was the antelope-like Kanbaru-san, this would have been over in a flash, but my sluggish movements would give Anti-Nadeko plenty time to deal with. She could even stick a yawn in there for all she cares.

By the time she was within my reach, Anti-Nadeko had already dodged the chair and was now facing towards me.

From up high, looking down on me.

'Piss off. You're the one who needs a fucking break. *You* don't like working like this either, don't you?

'Just stop if you can't fucking take it, huhhh?'

With her saying that, my slow movement ground to a complete standstill, as if stabbed in my weak spot. Anti-Nadeko swung her round gouge at me without a hint of mercy, determined to spill my organs.

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And just like that, I captured my second shikigami.

Hm?

No, this was not a timeskip.

Nor a flashback; this is a continuation.

A chronological continuation from the previous part.

The reason being, my wish of being a manga artist was not mere talk — I might not be bright, but I have read a lot of battle manga.

So I had in my mind a two-stage strategy.

If the office chair distraction and going for her via her blind-spot with my sketchbook sheet was stage one, then the Plan B in case I failed was stage two.

I say all this, but it was really simple.

Upon hearing Anti-Nadeko's pronouncement that she would 'split my guts', I considered going along with it.

And use it against her.

However, this battle strategy was not a product of logic, but practically of instinct — if I knew, I should have worn chainmail armour beneath my sweatshirt; whilst such fantasies are once again an escape from reality, a thought so shallow it could not even be classified as regret, precisely because it was something I could not do, I decided to think through it more realistically; if I could

hide that magazine beside me, it should work as armour.

But as loose (and lame) as a sweatshirt may be, a magazine probably could not withstand a stabbing from a chisel.

If I protected myself around the torso, as short-tempered Anti-Nadeko may be, she would aim somewhere else, such as the throat — be it the gut or the throat, they are more weak spots than body parts. Anyway, even though there may be a difference in character, they are all me; the moment I stretched my hand towards that bookshelf, she could already guess what I am about to do.

Being stabbed by a chisel in the throat is a harrowing thought.

It must be avoided at all costs — therefore.

I deliberately did not dodge her attack towards my stomach.

Then, with determination, I protected myself with the office chair, and as I was hiding behind the back, I tucked something underneath my shirt without her noticing.

The most I could tuck in was a couple shreds of *paper*.

Yes, in other words, with those scraps of paper, she *got captured voluntarily* — I took out every blank sheet of paper and fastened them underneath my clothes with the elastic down my sweatpants, save for one sheet that I held in my hand.

Like armour.

Not chainmail, but papermail.

When Anti-Nadeko stabbed me in the stomach with her chisel, she flew into the paper herself.

Not flying moths to a flame, but a flying Anti-Nadeko to paper.

One fold, and it is sealed.

Another shikigami vanquished, yay!

Obviously, I was not *that* happy about it — in fact, thinking back on it, I felt what I did was a life-threatening, nigh impossible gamble; all colour drained from my face.

What the hell was I doing?

Looking at my torn jacket, I nearly fainted.

Why *would* I initiate such fanciful combat… it was probably affected by the tension of the scene; maybe Anti-Nadeko's mood really got inside my head. It was like an experimental idea in battle manga, and I was lucky that it worked, but it could have been more than my jacket that got ripped; it could have been the paper underneath as well.

The specialist Ononoki-chan would never adopt such a flawed strategy — Ougi-san would probably say 'what a fool' with his trademark grin.

I've become addicted to gambling.

Rather than saying this was a result of trying my luck, it might be better to say the image of me being dead here, being dead in this room, caused my rampage — I nearly caused a catastrophic transformation that must be avoided at all costs.

A dangerous idea such as this is plenty enough drawn on a manga, but in real life? —

if someone accuses me of reading (drawing?) too much manga, and being unable to distinguish fantasies from reality, I have nothing to say back to them.

No.

Even so, it ended in success, so I can be forgiven for being happy over it for a moment, but those last words from Anti-Nadeko have pierced my heart more than any chisel could.

'You're the one who needs a break.'

'You don't like working like this either, don't you?'

…Those words from Anti-Nadeko could be considered part of me too. The same probably goes for Fawning Nadeko then.

Given that a shikigami is an agent, a representative of their masters, then what they say were probably reflections of how I truly feel.

My true thoughts, said by my shikigami doubles.

Of course, that's not everything.

The amount of effort I put in to realise my dream has undoubtedly brought jollity into my life. The real, visible improvements in my drawing, or the new, awesome ideas that pop into my head — it would be a lie if I said I did not enjoy it.

But if something else brings me greater joy and was also equally doable, then can I still continue at it?

It was not only those last words.

Hating putting in effort, hating work, hating work that I hate doing, those were probably not the words of 'past me', let alone the words of Kuchinawa-san — that thought alone really crushes me.

It is depressing.

Facing oneself is something very tough.

Without realising, yet thoroughly analysing what I hate about myself… come on, why would anyone call this me 'cute'?

My inside, whether past or present, is a muddy heap.

It is impressive how disgusting it is.

I should have let her go ahead and split me open, shouldn't I?

With that said, Present Nadeko should not sulk and wallow — Present Nadeko is a pragmatic dream-seeker. Right now, I am still illegally trespassing.

Now that things have settled, I have to make good my escape.

I must leave for my own sake.

But before that, a bit of cleaning up.

Cleaning up after 'two people' fighting is not too difficult, but I wonder what I could do with the skew chisel lodged into the floor.

Though I cannot leave it alone, taking the blade out would be a challenge even for Anti-Nadeko.

If I simply tried to pluck it out, I could end up snapping the blade… at this point, I had another lesson, a manga-esque idea.

Because no matter if it is critical or dangerous, I learn most of my lessons from manga — and also from exuberant friends or inglorious swindlers.

The paper that was tucked in my shirt has returned to my pocket; I took out another sheet, and gently placed it atop the chisel.

Just as I thought.

The chisel was sealed within the paper.

…This being the chisel of a shikigami, so I thought I could seal it all the same, but seeing it makes it almost look like magic.

From the way it is used, this special talent could come in very handy, but if I were to treat this as a crutch, a world of destruction awaits; that is what my instinct tells me.

I must use it in moderation.

In reality, this was the result of me thinking I could achieve the ten-thousand-hour rule with that sweet temptation.

I should save this for a party trick, and nothing more.

Anyway, I successfully retrieved the chisel.

The scar on the floorboard remained, but its depth aside, it was from a chisel after all; one has to look for it to notice it, such was its size (or lack of). If anything, the marks from Anti-Nadeko's furious stomping with her wooden clogs would likely prove more noticeable. No amount of party tricks could solve that problem.

Regardless, with the damage done to the front gate, it is impossible to completely hide

everything — I will just have to let that unbridled friend of mine, Tsukihi-chan, know.

Tsukihi-chan would say,

'Alright, then I'll tell them I did it.'

And help out without giving it any ounce of thought, such is her dangerous amount of generosity; I should be careful in how I word it to her, otherwise it might come back to bite me.

However, that has not happened yet.

That is epilogue content.

Right now, this game of pursuit continues.

This is today.

After some twists and turns, I have finally captured Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko, with two shikigami to go.

Gentle Nadeko and Divine Nadeko.

The road here has not been fun or easy, and I only got lucky so far, but even so, we were now halfway through the mission; surely the remaining half would come about eventually.

Which reminds me of the question 'is the cup half full or half empty', but for that, there is probably no correct answer.

When one is thirsty, then 'half full' would be the optimistic answer; when one is trying to empty the cup, then 'half empty' would be the optimistic answer — therefore, in my current situation, I was feeling 'half empty'.

No, if one has to have an optimistic thought, then with me, an outsider, still managing to retrieve two shikigami, then

surely Ononoki-chan, a professional, would have had further progress.

One of the two remaining shikigami, Divine Nadeko, would seem to be trickier to deal with than the other — Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko were at least based on humans, but Divine Nadeko was based on a god — things might not go to plan, so I will have to carry on.

I will have to carry on and be aware.

Even if I cannot think well, I can at least move.

I stepped out into the corridor after cleaning the room.

As for where to go next, I did not have anywhere specific in mind, but someone might notice the front door and call the police, so I had better leave the Araragi household quick.

Speaking of the odd front door, whilst I ended up fighting Anti-Nadeko as part of it, I originally came here to ambush Gentle Nadeko.

So from a strategic point of view, I can still hide in Tsukihi-chan's room and wait for her to arrive… but there is no need to wait for Gentle Nadeko to stroll in; she is so timid that noticing that odd door would be enough to scare her off.

In the end, all of this is my own deduction, but it would be wiser to search somewhere else — like that, I wrung whatever ounces of intelligence I could from my head like a towel, and was about to go past Tsukihi-

chan's room, when I stopped halfway through.

When I looked down at my own sweatshirt.

'Mmmm…'

It was torn by Anti-Nadeko's chisel, and my stomach was in full view; considering Bloomer Nadeko was wandering around with barely anything, this exposure was not exactly disastrous, but to move about in this would still be, to some extent, very visible.

This is more than just lame, any middle school girl out and about in pyjamas would grab people's attention — not a good state to be in when pursuing others.

Right.

I'll borrow, then.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

Tsukihi-chan likes dressing up, so I am sure she would not immediately notice if one or two clothes go missing.

Since I was already trespassing (which was the shikigami's fault, in addition to destruction of property), I might as well go the extra mile and borrow somebody else's things; a model case of a person spiralling into crime.

When one falls, one falls *quick*.

But if I was doing this, I had to do this blisteringly quick. Quicker than a fall. Now that I was in a phase of retreat, I cannot dawdle — I opened the door to Tsukihi-chan's room.

This is somebody else's home I am familiar with, no, somebody else's room I am familiar with. So it seems she has this room to herself; I do not remember the room looking like this.

It would be a miracle if Gentle Nadeko was hiding in this room, but alas, my luck only got me so far — no sign of her in the walk-in wardrobe either. If this was a movie, this would be the time when a zombie pops up. If Gentle Nadeko was, as the rumours say, half-naked, it would be great if she could nick some clothes here with me too.

Anyway, I did not have high hopes.

The near-infinite choice of clothes I had at my disposal was very much like a bonus stage for me.

My measurements are about the same as Tsukihi-chan's.

However, whilst I did have the wardrobe to myself, I cannot borrow her kimono — it would make me stand out even more.

I shall borrow the entire set of clothes Tsukihi-chan wears when she comes over to play.

I always thought it looked nice.

Ignoring her worries.

Thinking back on this past half year, when I discarded any semblance of being fashionable and worked non-stop on drawing, and only drawing, looking at Tsukihi-chan's wardrobe, which must have took forever to organise, perhaps 'not doing something' does not count as putting in effort.

I would not say this is laziness, but when working towards something, it should be an active act.

Although whether burglary could be considered active is something I am not sure about… soon, I've finished changing.

A dress change… no, with this much, it was more a dress up.

I folded the sweatshirt and tucked it into the depths of the wardrobe. It might be discovered in no time at all, but Tsukihi-chan would probably think it was her old clothes and patch the holes.

Ta-da~

Short culottes, black knee highs, plus a blouse with floral frills. I even borrowed a cap to suit my very short hair.

I carelessly forgot to match the clothes with the sandals, but there was no way I could borrow shoes — if they start rubbing against me whilst in pursuit, it would be a big problem.

I checked myself with the mirror inside the wardrobe door; though it was a perfect copy, I could never look as good as Tsukihi-chan, but I have done well in terms of camouflage. If I pushed down my cap, nobody'd recognise me from afar.

Pushing down my cap… huh.

This reminds me of my Gentle Nadeko years.

Quite ironic that I was having to hide my face again to search for Gentle Nadeko.

Whilst trapped in this wave of self-deprecation, I still kept my head down on the main objective, as I closed the wardrobe and left Tsukihi's room.

However, as I went down the stairs (tiptoeing again, just in case) to the ground floor, thinking I will leave this time, I heard a ring.

My entire body shook.

The first thing I had in my head was an emergency alarm, but this was not a middle school corridor — there were no sprinklers here.

Then could that be a security alarm?

Given their parents' occupation, it would not be unnatural for them to install something like that… no, but why would an alarm that has not rung until now ring all of a sudden?

Don't tell me it was activated by Tsukihi-chan's wardrobe… if that is so, my abuse of friendship is about to receive its just desserts.

Do no evil.

Although honestly, when one thinks of the attitude Tsukihi-chan has given me, borrowing a hundred clothes still would not make it even between us — well, not that she would listen to me about this at all, but upon closer inspection, this was not the ring of a security alarm.

It was just from an ordinary telephone.

The noise was completely unlike a mobile phone ringtone — looking ahead, the

corridor leading to the living room had a landline phone, its light blinking.

Realistically, this ringing would cease even if I ignored it, and go to voicemail, but I lost all sense of self-restraint, thinking I have to stop this noise, and picked up the receiver.

A product of my reflexes — a fat load of good they are, my reflexes.

'Hello! It's Sengoku!'

I straight up said *I'm Sengoku*.

The first thing the serial criminal did was declare her name.

The gall.

Communication even on the phone posed a problem for me — I can only pray that somebody had dialled the wrong number; however, this was not somebody dialling the wrong number.

This was a call that made me hope something was wrong.

'Huh…? Sengoku-san?'

It was a voice I know.

It was a voice I could never forget.

It was Senjougahara Hitagi-san.

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The receiver slipped from my hand, as I yanked on the cord and catapulted out of the Araragi household.

That was terrifying!

I almost died from shock!

Even a zombie clawing out from the wardrobe would not have scared me as much — one may even say it was a near-death experience.

Am I still actually alive!?

This isn't the afterlife, right!?

What was with that great adventure of Sengoku Nadeko just now?

I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing; what *was* I supposed to be doing?

This splash of cold water made me feel like everything up to now was a dream.

Even a ring from a security alarm would have been better than that terrifying phone call. I was afraid of bumping into her whilst searching, but why was Senjougahara-san calling into the Araragi house (via landline!) in the middle of the day?

No, from where she's standing, she would question why that despicable Sengoku Nadeko was in the Araragi household in the middle of the day. In the end, I guess even she would not want to view a hated figure like me as a monster.

Because those chain of events last year was me causing trouble for Senjougahara-san.

I was the one who entered her radar.

When I was Divine Nadeko, I had even prophesied killing that person — a crime that makes trespassing and unilateral borrowing look like peanuts in comparison.

An apology would not save this.

I did not even apologise.

So I should not have escaped like that — which was easier said than done; terror is terror.

It does not make any sense, not even legal sense.

It was terrifying.

Maybe the guilt multiplied the terror, but even without that, it was already terrifying in the first place — aah, I was so spooked.

I am never picking up a phone ever again.

In any case, I was beginning to relax a little having successfully captured Anti-Nadeko; to be tensed up so compulsorily was a kind of luck.

That sense of being well-dressed had also thoroughly vanished, which I'll pretend is a good thing.

In order to forget that terrifying experience, I should focus on looking for Nadekos — there was no use denying, my trespassing into the Araragi house was glaring. I will think about cleaning up after this later with Tsukihi-chan.

I'm counting on you, Tsukihi-chan.

After shooting out of the Araragi household, I ran as far as I could (my knees were all wobbly now), but my physique really was inadequate, just from looking where I am; this was no afterlife; I did not even make it that far.

It was territory I was familiar with.

My hometown.

Mm~… how do I put this, this road is one I frequented… I remember that if I continued along this road, I would reach the entrance to the mountain that houses the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

The Kitashirahebi Shrine, huh…

I was going to find the wandering, stimulating Bloomer Nadeko, which has nothing to do with my current destination, but if I changed my sights to Divine Nadeko, then Kitashirahebi Shrine is a central location.

A lead as solid as a rock.

Just as Fawning Nadeko was in middle school, Divine Nadeko could be in the Shrine — though not technically a homing instinct, a shikigami for the most part moves according to their basic character settings.

Gentle Nadeko not being in the Araragi house and Anti-Nadeko setting up an ambush inside it could be considered exceptions… but even so, there was no reason for me not to search the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

Theories are important.

A place as vital as the Kitashirahebi Shrine might have already been combed through by

Ononoki-chan… but it will be better to have a look regardless.

It will be a good thing to do; even if Divine Nadeko is nowhere to be found up there, at least I could send a prayer.

Ever since I descended from that mountain, I heard that the Kitashirahebi Shrine became empty for a while, and then a new god made their arrival.

As the predecessor, it would be nice to say a little hello.

It might not be the time for hellos, but — though for different reasons from the Araragi house — it was otherwise a place I would not visit.

With that, I knew where I was heading next.

Command confirmed.

I will leave Ougi-san with the task of searching Gentle Nadeko; I am going to face Divine Nadeko and attack across the mountains.

Speaking of, though I have gone up this mountain hundreds of times, with my depleted stamina, could I even make it to the end?

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The moment Anti-Nadeko pointed at me with the chisel, I realised the extent of my sins on this mountain.

I believed it was the way to lift the curse, so I killed many, many snakes; I did not only kill, I dismembered them with a chisel, scattering them all over the shrine.

As a result, the curse only strengthened in power, over and over, until my entire body was coiled by invisible snakes, leaving behind a traumatic experience.

Thinking back, that was when I first started this exchange with oddities — and when I started my relationship with the Araragi family too.

A restart.

No, to call it a 'relationship with the Araragi family' is to cunningly or cowardly miss the point on purpose… however, that incident also gave way to restarting that indescribable relationship with Tsukihi-chan.

Somehow, only through such unforgivable barbarity did I begin pursuing my dreams and working for it; I don't get life.

Life is simply unfathomable.

Were it not for Kaiki-san spreading that 'curse' and starting that pandemic, I would probably still be Gentle Nadeko, readying myself for the entrance exams.

Fawning Nadeko might say this would have been for the better, but from Present

Nadeko, even if this was worse, I still want to live on like this.

No need for her to be my spokesperson.

I will opine my own opinions.

In order to avoid being affected by Divine Nadeko's words, I willed myself up that mountain.

Past the torii, into the shrine grounds, and I saw…

'O-Ononoki-chan!?'

Yes, it was Ononoki-chan.

However, she did not look like the Ononoki-chan I know — in fact, as a doll oddity, she did not look like a human at all.

To put it bluntly, she looked like a corpse in chunks.

Arms, legs, hands, wrists, ankles, torso, head, Ononoki-chan's body and her colourful dress were hacked up into pieces, and littered — seriously, littered — all over the grounds of the shrine; full on sacrilege.

'AAAAAAAAAAAGH! O-Ononoki-chan!'

When I watch a crime drama, in those scenes when someone first discovers a body and screams, I would think 'Geez, you wouldn't scream so clearly like that, would you. You'd more likely be speechless, no?' and coldly label it as a stereotype that has happened hundreds of times; I hereby wish to retract and express my fullest regret over such baseless accusations.

I was wrong, and I admit to screaming.

It would be a shriek all right.

Like that.

Let alone if the corpse was a friend's.

'No, no, no! Ononoki-chan! Speak to me, please!'

'Alright, alright. Pipe down, geez.'

She actually spoke.

My wish was granted from the heavens.

I really was speechless now, as I fell back bottom-first onto the ground — which brought my point of view closer down, as I locked eyes with Ononoki-chan's living head.

I can say this is a living head, right?

It's dead no matter how I look at it though.

No, but, she just, spoke —

'I am a doll oddity, so dismemberment alone won't kill me. Also, I've been keeping it a secret from you, but I am also a corpse oddity, so I've been dead the whole time.'

'……'

She spoke a lot. From only her head.

And it turns out she is a corpse oddity.

Then have I been using a corpse as a model and improving my illustration skills with that? — am I Sugita Genpaku?

But she was right; upon closer inspection, despite her corpse being everywhere, there were no bloodstains along the path. Probably because of her being a corpse, any cuts or hacks will bring no more blood.

Which makes me think, if she could do a 'Venus de Milo' for me, then if I ask her nicely… I wonder if she could do the 'Winged Victory of Samothrace'.

'Come now, you've cut snakes here before, how could you be scared by something like

this. But now that you're here, I've something that needs your help, Sengoku Nadeko.'

'W-w-what is it?'

'I can't see clearly from here, but I'm afraid the rest of my body is scattered around here; could you get them all for me? If all the parts are put back together, then my wounds will heal.'

Ononoki's quartered body expressionlessly made fun of me whilst giving me an incredible request.

Collect her chunks?

'I would welcome you putting aside your artistic side and resist the temptation of painting out this landscape.'

'No, there's no way I would draw such a brutal manga now, would I?'

I resisted the producer's will whilst picking up Ononoki-chan's severed limbs. I remember walking up the mountain and pondering about where my life would go, but the last thing I expected was repairing my friend's embalmed corpse.

But at least this was better than a dead friend.

Even if she was dead in the first place.

'Th-the really small bits I couldn't pick them all up…'

'You don't have to go after every last bit. I'm doing some emergency patching-up. If the worst happens, dirt from around here will have to do.'

Like a zombie.

No, that was what it was.

If it was Ononoki-chan who sprang out of the walk-in wardrobe, then it would be a rather cute zombie… unless if it were in pieces; that'd still be terrifying.

'If you really insist, your flesh would do too.'

'That'd be too frightening, wouldn't it?'

'Give me thy flesh… jk, that's a *Kizumonogatari* joke.'

Not funny.

Thoroughly unfunny, from head to toe.

Which was what I was collecting here in the first place, come to think of it.

'Well, I mean, corpse oddities are inconvenient here. Consider vampires; they're also immortal, but when their flesh fly off, they disintegrate, and regenerate from the cut — no effort necessary.'

She spoke of a most gruesome rule.

Immortal oddities having different mechanisms was the least of my worries.

I pretended not to hear that, and continued gathering the littered parts. It was much work. Everything feels like assembling a normal figurine, but the skin, it somehow felt like a corpse.

Somehow.

'— Ah, but in this case, being a corpse oddity was a good thing; this really was a blessing in disguise. Because, you see, venom dissolves blood, which would be a problem for blood-based oddities such as vampires.'

'Eh…? Venom?'

No, I should have noticed it earlier.

If Ononoki-chan was like this around the shrine, then the only culprit has to be Divine Nadeko — my shikigami managed to land a counterattack on Ononoki-chan, that must have been it.

But from what I can see, there was no trace of Divine Nadeko… from what she left behind, though, I was already thoroughly terrified.

Even though it wasn't a vampire, my blood was drained either way.

If Ononoki-chan, an oddity specialist and an oddity herself, was defeated like that by Divine Nadeko, then when I go against her head-to-head… this is what is known as not knowing my place.

From this, it would be no surprise if I ended up in pieces as a corpse — but, um, would Divine Nadeko do that in the first place?

What reasons lie behind your acts of brutality…

This was too much.

'My, my, seriously, ever since mingling with Araragi Tsukihi, I've never had any luck. Oh well, at least one good thing came out of this — that'd be befriending you, Sengoku Nadeko.'

'Huh. Why are you saying things that make me happy?'

Are you trying to make me fall further?

I had no idea how serious she was.

Putting aside now, I was sure this kid had absolutely despised me.

A doll is easily affected by the people around them, i.e. has no set character — is that so?

'Yes. Therefore, if you regard me as kind-hearted, that means you're kind-hearted as well.'

'As I was saying, there's no use making me fall any further.'

No amount of temptation would make me fall further; I was already at the very bottom.

On top (on bottom?) of all that, my shikigami has hacked my friend into pieces.

'No, setting that aside for a moment, this has nothing to do with types of oddities, this is just normal, right? Some things you like, some things you don't like. Some things you used to like, now you hate, some things you used to hate, now you like — the bitter veg you wouldn't touch as a child could become a favourite in adulthood.'

'Huh…'

Well, I guess that much seemed true.

Likes and dislikes change with the times — liking the same thing, repeating the same thing forever, or being forced to do the same thing over and over against one's will, all those take their toll.

Emotional seriality.

Having seen all kinds of Nadekos in shikigami form, all different eras of Nadekos, that was my only conclusion.

'…Uh, Ononoki-chan, the uh… do I need to stick the hair back on too? A lot of it's gone…'

‘Couldn’t even if you wanted to. It’s not flesh. But it’s okay, it’ll go back to normal. I’m the type of doll that can grow hair.’

That’s great to hear.

No, I don’t actually know if that was a good thing, but I’d better focus on getting all of Ononoki-chan’s parts, and put them together like a three-dimensional puzzle.

Connect them, piece by piece.

? — They weren’t connecting?

‘No need to be careful, just press it in like you would with clay. Just slightly more force than you’re comfortable with. Pretend you’re trying to deform me.’

‘Uh, uhm…’

Honestly, this was quite grisly work.

But I should be the one cleaning up after my shikigami’s mess — well, even if it was not my responsibility, now that Ononoki-chan called me her friend, it would not be nice to leave her in pieces.

Then I shall start from the legs.

‘S-sorry if I mix up left and right.’

‘Quit horsing around. I’ll mix your limbs up.’

She’s mad.

She’s horrifying when she’s mad.

‘S-so, what happened? Was Divine Nadeko that powerful?’

‘Well, you can say she’s strong… but I am a professional after all. I went in this task expecting to win — no, not a task. It’s personal. Weird, isn’t it, for me to take something personally…’

‘……’

I thought Ononoki-chan was trying to sweet-talk me again, but she simply shrugged quietly — no, that’s not right, she doesn’t have shoulders.

‘You’re asking me what happened? Well, you aren’t wrong, I got struck back by Divine Nadeko. But technically, Divine Nadeko wasn’t my only opponent — I was against both Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko, two shikigami at the same time.’

A two-versus-one, I see.

I’m surprised — I never thought the scattered shikigami would ever co-operate amongst their own.

Well, I say that, uniforms did change hands, and chisels did get taken away; there was at least some modicum of communication going on.

Even so, all Gentle Nadeko did was give things away to all the other Nadekos… then I’m guessing Divine Nadeko has used Gentle Nadeko in some way.

‘Indeed. That seems to be what happened. Anyhow, let’s use the time we have now to reflect on why I failed.’

By ‘the time we have now’, that should be the time I spend re-attaching her limbs — which means, even as a doll oddity, wounds take time to heal.

I cannot go it alone here; I should be a good listener.

‘First, after going our separate ways, I found Gentle Nadeko. I don’t know what

caused it, but she was walking around town in a swimsuit.'

'Swimsuit!?'

An unexpected new nugget of information.

No way, shouldn't Gentle Nadeko be half-naked wearing only gym shorts!?

'C-could it be, the micro-bikini!?'

'No, a school swimsuit.'

Oh come on, that's not so bad!

Thank goodness!

Come to think of it, the micro-bikini belonged to Fawning Nadeko. I was afraid that was what they swapped, but it seemed not to be the case.

However, I now remember.

Speaking of that, I also wore a school swimsuit once.

It was overshadowed by my memory of wearing only gym shorts, but back when I was coiled with snakes, I wore those clothes once too.

In order to make the scales visible, and also make it easier to move about — that was it, right? Even so, now that I remember, I still have no idea why I ended up in that costume, but purely as a matter-of-fact, I borrowed them from Kanbaru-san, along with the gym shorts.

Yes, it was not for the seas, but for climbing up mountains.

And back then, we went to the shrine, an assumed air pocket of aberrational activity, to lift the curse.

The ritual itself was not exactly a success, but that aside… I was careless.

It is true that the first thing one would think of with regards to Kitashirahebi Shrine is Divine Nadeko, but Gentle Nadeko does not have nothing to do with this shrine either.

In the end, it was Gentle Nadeko who dismembered those many snakes, so there was a close connection to begin with — the moment I saw Ononoki-chan in pieces, I should have known that Gentle Nadeko might have had a hand in causing this, in addition to Divine Nadeko.

In fact, I did not realise it was Divine Nadeko's bidding straight away, so there was no chance I could have guessed that.

'I tailed Gentle Nadeko in the school swimsuit. I could have used the "Unlimited Rulebook" and defeated her there and then, but I decided to let her swim — she's in a swimsuit, see —'

'……'

Please don't make jokes like that when all you have is a head.

If I laughed then, that would have been impolite, surely.

'The reason I say that, is because in the end, all four shikigami have to be taken care of. Gentle Nadeko is one of the lower-risk shikigami, so I was planning to use her as live bait, and hopefully catch them all by surprise.'

Hmm.

Compared to me, who wanted to deal with them one by one, she thinks differently from me — this breadth and depth in vision really makes the difference between a professional and an amateur.

In my case, Anti-Nadeko was no easy figure to tame, but if I let the highly sociable Fawning Nadeko catch the other three, that might have been a plausible tactic.

No, I could definitely never pull that off, and she might have endangered the students of year 3, class 5, so I could not have let her move on her own.

'Then, I continued following Gentle Nadeko in the school swimsuit up the mountain… however, now that I think of it, I felt like I was set up. It was a complete decoy.'

'Decoy…'

'Yes. A trap — Divine Nadeko's trap lured me into the shrine; a serpent's fang bit into me from my back.'

Rather than letting her swim as the lure, I was the lure — Ononoki-chan added.

As I was saying, stop trying to make me laugh.

A middle school girl climbing up a mountain in a school swimsuit is a hilarious enough scene all on its own.

'Which means I wasn't the one who let Gentle Nadeko swim around as bait, but Divine Nadeko — seriously, what kind of trick is this, shikigami using shikigami…'

Ain't that the truth.

But given Gentle Nadeko's servility, it was bound to happen — and whilst the other was a shikigami, this was a god we are talking about.

It seemed the left leg attached fine (so it can be fastened, thank goodness), so I started attaching Ononoki-chan's right leg. Even without mixing up left and right, I had to be careful about the angle which I was attaching them… it could probably be fine-tuned after, but I wanted to do my best here.

It might be a life-or-death surgical situation, but treat this as playing with a doll instead, I said to myself.

I was definitely not playing with a dead body.

'Uh, Ononoki-chan, what should I do with the clothes? I mean, I couldn't tell garment from garment.'

'Good point. We don't have needles or threads, so sewing is not an option; could you roughly patch them together so it is at least dignified?'

Roger that.

Whilst the end result was a sleeveless top that exposes her belly button, this Ononoki-chan looks quite refreshing.

As refreshing as a corpse can be.

Her hair was shorter too, quite the image change.

Something Sodachi-onee-chan failed in doing.

Consider this Ononoki-chan's 'healthy child' version, except it's a corpse.

As far as character design goes, there could be two versions of shikigami to be made here… no, even without that, Ononoki-chan was a shikigami in the first place.

But to think that whilst I was dressing up in Tsukihi-chan's room, Ononoki-chan was being ripped apart along with her clothes — my tiny self is about to be crushed under the weight of my guilt.

What was the chronology anyway?

Gentle Nadeko wandering around in only gym shorts, and Gentle Nadeko climbing up the mountain in a school swimsuit — which came first, which came later?

Regardless of the order, she is a downright pervert, but I reckon this was an important factor in figuring things out… no, I was not trying to diminish the guilt of dressing up by thinking about what Gentle Nadeko did whilst I was doing that.

'By the way, how were things on your end, Sengoku Nadeko? You've changed clothes. Seeing as your limbs are still with you, I'm guessing you haven't met Divine Nadeko.'

Please don't judge this by the state of my limbs relative to my body — considering that being dismembered could have been my alternative fate today, I broke out in a cold sweat.

Honestly, in front of the spectacularly failed specialist, it felt a bit awkward telling her that I managed to capture two shikigami, but now that she noticed my fancy dress, I can no longer stay silent.

I continued healing (repairing?) Ononoki-chan whilst giving her as objective a report as I could, without making it sound like I was tooting my own horn, but nevertheless feeding her as many details as I can.

Oshino Meme-san once said that anything can be a hint regarding oddities, so everything should be reported in as much detail as possible — well, these are all supernatural stories anyway.

No chance of comprehending them if they were untold.

I say that, I did not reveal the phone call with Senjougahara-san — it scares me even thinking about it!

Perhaps this was the mark of a pro, but after listening to my tales of luck (and only luck) in calm silence,

'Hmph. Show-off.'

She commented coldly.

Wait, was the calm simply limited to expression and voice?

The inferno of envy burns strong here.

'Humblebragging sonuvabitch.'

'Uh, don't hate on me, please? I'm in the middle of carefully reassembling your limbs.'

'Anyway; Oshino Ougi, huh… if that guy's getting involved, that changes everything… oh hell no. I'm asking you just in case, Sengoku-chan, but you haven't contacted Oshino Ougi after going your separate ways, right?'

'M-mm… yeah, I'm worried. Ougi-san should now be chasing after Gentle Nadeko

from the reports given, but if anything goes wrong and he faces Divine Nadeko alone, he might not make it out in one piece…'

'Your worries are nothing like mine.'

True.

I know that.

I may say I was praying for his safety, but I also feel that person could survive a world-ending apocalypse.

After all, even if he is not an expert, that guy is Oshino Meme-san's nephew.

'Ah, but, now that Gentle Nadeko is co-ordinating with Divine Nadeko, they'd be at the same place.'

Whilst tricky, from a certain perspective, by now, the situation could not be simpler.

The shikigami originally moved individually, which made splitting up necessary in searching them, but now that they have teamed up, so can we.

A team battle is up next.

'Well, there are pros and cons to team battles… once Gentle Nadeko is under Divine Nadeko's command, the shikigami may evolve even further.'

'Evolve?'

'Maybe they'd even deify. Worst comes to worst, we might be up against *two* Divine Nadekos.'

That would be… very bad.

But it was also very likely.

In reality, I am Gentle Nadeko and Divine Nadeko — they may have different designs,

but both of them are unmistakably Sengoku Nadeko.

Sengoku Nadeko, enemies with Sengoku Nadeko and Sengoku Nadeko.

This was the condition I found myself in.

'But Ononoki-chan, if we turn it on its head, then wouldn't it be possible to turn Divine Nadeko into Gentle Nadeko or Fawning Nadeko?'

'Ah well… it might be possible if we had a con man with us.'

Ononoki-chan appeared doubtful (Deishuuful?) regarding evolution, or should I say devolution (not to deify, but to personify?) — no, but, regardless of if it can be done in the first place, seeing as Ononoki-chan was in pieces, it would be possible to ask for help from Kaiki-san or other experts, right?

For instance, contacting their leader, Gaen-san…

'There are two reasons why I don't want to do that. First, my failings will be made public, and two, you could be penalised alongside your shikigami.

Forget about the former, the latter was paramount.

No, the former would be bad too.

Maybe Ononoki-chan was saying this to avoid making me more stressed than I was, but for a shikigami oddity like Ononoki-chan, failure — in a private mission, no less — means more than embarrassment, but potential penalties coming her way too.

It may be ludicrous to say this, but Ononoki-chan is facing pretty much the same situation as I was.

Of course, when necessary, Ononoki-chan should be able to make that tough decision as a pro, as a shikigami, but I should not goad her into that.

'However, if there are two gods, it's something we couldn't handle; the sooner we do this, the better… so did Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko escape and leave you here after they're done dismembering you?'

'Yes. Rather than say they escaped, they wanted to kill you before killing me.'

Wow, the initiative —

Quite unlike myself.

But they were me…

'Then thank my lucky stars that I've missed them so far… so if we sit here and wait, they'll make their way here sooner or later?'

'If this was a battle of endurance, then that can be done, but since we are worrying if Gentle Nadeko could evolve into Divine Nadeko, then we cannot wait or remain passive; we must take pursuit.'

Indeed.

But how were we even going to find the two once-again-missing shikigami?

If we were looking for someone who moves on instinct, we may be able to go according to witness testimonies, but if they were hiding themselves, then it's a leap up the difficulty settings for us.

Even with Divine Nadeko as leader, if they had discussed this well, it should be something beyond our wildest imaginations —

'No, I didn't get set up and defeated for nothing. Even though I failed, I did manage to play a hand against them.'

'A hand?'

I tilted my head in confusion as I lifted up Ononoki-chan's head with my two hands — the body itself was about done, so now it was finally time to attach the head.

All I had to do is that and the repair is done — wait.

That's not right. Something's missing.

From the parts I have collected, I couldn't find anything below the right wrist.

'Atop Divine Nadeko's back, I *pasted* my right hand — I literally played my hand. So no matter where she hides, even as stealthy as a snake, I could locate it. As embarrassing as it is, I have done the very least I should as a pro.'

Ononoki-chan's head, now on my lap, said without a hint of expression — seems like there was a sliver of hope after all.

020

Thanks to Ononoki-chan's work, we at least had an inkling of where this pursuit was going, but not all of this was good news — for Ononoki-chan, this was a strategy of playing a weak hand to advantage.

Or in her case, playing a dead hand.

This approach seemed to be one she least wanted to do; whilst it made our pursuit possible, she paid a price — specifically, her right hand.

Which meant she could not use her dominant hand.

Corpses do not feel any pain, but in terms of an oddity, her combat prowess has taken a big dip.

'Well, anyway, improvise a prosthetic hand for me. Use the dirt around here. Sengoku Nadeko, I've been telling you to hold back your artistic side, but now is time for it to shine.'

This was putting me on the spot.

My artistic side has only worked in two dimensions so far…

But using the dirt in the shrine for a prosthetic (and also to patch up any flesh lost during dismemberment) could prove more effective than ordinary dirt.

It was from the shrine, after all.

Besides, this is an air pocket for oddities-related phenomena, a terrain that encourages 'impurities', the stuff that makes up oddities,

to coalesce; in reality, when I was being rid of those snakes, their movements, which normally could not be seen, has, thanks to the dust here — wait, what?

No, that's not right.

That's not the case.

It was the case when I was being lifted from my curse, but I remember Oshino Meme-san had sealed this air pocket as part of his job; and to avoid any more 'impurities' forming here, Oshino Meme-san's senior, Gaen-san had attempted to install a new god onto the then-derelict Kitashirahebi Shrine.

At first, the candidate for the deity was, as Ononoki-chan calls her, the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, i.e. the current Oshino Shinobu, but I stole that role.

Such was the origin story of Divine Nadeko.

With me as a deity, the shrine was renovated, but thinking back on it, Divine Nadeko was there for not that long… after that, a few months passed before a new god took that place.

This is getting long for an introduction, but the point is, it was a shame that the shrine no longer has much 'impurities', no ingredients for oddities — Ononoki-chan's weakening seems unavoidable no matter what.

'True, that. Shishirui Seishirou is no longer here too.'

'? — Who's that?'

'A poor fella who never became anybody. Anyway, I was joking about your "artistic

self". Balancing left and right whilst on the move is all I need, so keep an eye on the weight.'

That was a great help.

I wetted the dirt with some water from the chōzuya and set to work moulding Ononoki-chan's right hand.

I cannot believe I'm still playing with dirt at this age… it might not be exactly the same, but it reminds me of looking for Kuchinawa-san's shintai in a sand pit. Which park was that again?

'Oh, speaking of, Ononoki-chan.'

'What is it?'

Except the part below the right wrist, all parts were now connected, but just in case, I had her lie down on the path — if she disintegrated all of a sudden whilst on the move, that would be a great headache. To avoid wasting my time in that urgent hypothetical, I shall wait for her to heal completely.

'Um… is the new god in this shrine? I might be only in name, but I want to say hi as a predecessor.'

'No, not now. The backstory means this god likes going on walks… I don't know whether it's luck or divine intervention, but thankfully this god is not in the shrine for now. If it wasn't the case, Divine Nadeko might have leapt straight for that seat.'

'……'

She put it so simply, but it would be a disaster if that happened.

One can only imagine if Divine Nadeko really wanted the seat back… but if gods switch hands, this will affect the entire town.

Not just me.

The town being gripped with panic doesn't sound so ridiculous now.

'But you said the god's having a walk; is that alright? There could be an encounter with Divine Nadeko in the middle of town, no?'

'Indeed. Ideally, it'd be best if we find and protect the new god… but that god is often like a lost child; could be harder to find than a shikigami.'

A god who is like a lost child?

Without meaning to be rude, but is this god okay?

'Can't we meet with this strolling god and ask for some assistance? You sound like you know this god, Ononoki-chan.'

This really was getting myself out of a pinch with thoughts and prayers.

'You're right, we do know of each other, and that's why it shouldn't be done. In this case, asking god for help would sow the seeds for misfortune. This wasn't the preceding god's fault, this was *our* fault. If we receive divine assistance without paying any price, then this god might be deemed less trustworthy. For us, it's natural to expect help, but for the other side, to help is to break impartiality.'

'……'

Is this what Oshino Meme-san meant by 'people can only save themselves' —

From Ononoki-chan willing to model for my *dessins*, she probably thinks differently than I, but as a specialist, this was probably common sense amongst all of them.

'To put it lightly, Divine Nadeko is probably trying to first play this game of hide-and-seek to finish you off… and give her successor a coup d'état once in her complete form.'

In her complete form.

After taking my place, and confirming its self-existence.

In this scenario, unlike hating work and letting her emotions take over like Anti-Nadeko, Divine Nadeko was really trying to replace me.

I'm weak at the knees.

Weak little me is weak at the knees.

Can't two negatives make a positive? — well, that itself is a principle I couldn't wrap my head around.

I should get Sodachi-onee-chan from the Department of Mathematics to explain it to me so that I can understand, once I get the chance.

'…Okay, right hand is done.'

This was, in the end, improvised, so it was not really satisfactory, but I reckon I have handled Ononoki-chan's only request — that is, the weight — quite well.

'But wouldn't it just fall apart once you move it?'

'As long as it's connected, it's fine. It's just conceptual.'

'Hmmm…'

I don't know exactly what that meant, but if a specialist says it was fine, then it was fine; that aside, since it was made from dirt, it was not a looker.

'Mm. Thanks.'

But Ononoki-chan appeared satisfied.

Her face doesn't show it though.

'Then Ononoki-chan, where is Divine Nadeko now? Your actual right hand that you have latched onto Divine Nadeko's back, where is it now?

My thinking was, once we have a location, we may be able to rework our strategy.

'It's just a hand; it's not eyes, so I don't know the exact place. The only thing that can be known is the direction my finger's pointing in.'

She answered.

So eyes and hands are conceptual too?

Colour me interested, but now was not the time for delving in.

Direction… she probably meant up, down, left, right, cardinal directions, front and rear… something like that.

That was still enough to go on, but I still felt a bit uneasy.

For instance, even if it was eastwards, there was no sign of how far east that would be. To take an extreme example, Divine Nadeko could be in the Americas.

Being someone of few possessions, I of course don't have a passport.

'No, that wouldn't happen. Even as a god, even as an aberration, they are still shikigami you made, so they wouldn't stray too far from you.'

Until they take your place.

Whilst she concluded with that petrifying sentence, Ononoki-chan promised me. No matter what, Divine Nadeko's priority would still be taking over me — then my hikikomori life might be useful for once.

As a middle school girl, my life doesn't extend far out in the first place; as a hikikomori, I can narrow that even further.

'Ah, thank goodness I'm a hikikomori!'

'Isn't being a hikikomori what brought you into this mess?'

I was met with a rather harsh retort.

Fair enough, 'thank goodness' this was not.

But it is true: Sengoku Nadeko's lifelog has only been limited to Public Middle School #701, the Araragi household, and this Kitashirahebi Shrine — then the temporary duo that is Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko must only be somewhere in this town.

'Fwee'

Ononoki-chan sprung back up lightly with a flat noise — it may look effortless, but repair work is not something I am used to; I was worried the moment she touched the ground, she would fall back into pieces again, but the wounds healed as if they were never there.

Ononoki-chan has been resurrected.

'All thanks to you. However, the right hand is ultimately not what it seems, so it's not going to be stable — it'd be best to avoid using the "Unlimited Rulebook".'

'The, uh… good point.'

For me, the 'Unlimited Rulebook' is a technique I ask Ononoki-chan to use in modelling for me, but if it is used for offense, it is powerful enough to destroy a front gate; naturally, the recoil is also very powerful.

If it can pulverise her opponents, it poses the same risk for the recently re-joined Ononoki-chan.

'Indeed. I think I could only use it once.'

'Once… there's two of them though.'

'If I could score two hits with one shot, that'd be for the best, but seeing as Divine Nadeko is using Gentle Nadeko as bait, that would probably be difficult.'

Just as Fawning Nadeko built a 'human barrier' with classmates, Divine Nadeko would build a 'Nadeko barrier' with Gentle Nadeko.

How cruel you are, Sengoku Nadeko.

How pitiable you are, Sengoku Nadeko.

Of course, they are both Sengoku Nadeko.

All me.

'So, Sengoku Nadeko. Basically, I'll be depending on your talents — you confront them, I'll stay on as support.'

'Uh… y-you're putting me on the spot.'

My panicked response was met with Ononoki-chan's complete indifference (as usual, really);

'How? You've already managed to retrieve two shikigami. You just have to do the same thing again.'

She said.

'Compared to me who is rendered useless thanks to Araragi Tsukihi, you've got what it takes.'

'I don't think it's fair to blame it all on Tsukihi-chan…'

Having borrowed her clothes, I spoke in her defence.

That rebel.

'Besides, I've barely managed to do it one-on-one. Even ignoring that one of them is Divine Nadeko, to go against two shikigami solo at the same time…'

'Hey, hey, what're you saying. You're not going solo now, are you?'

Ononoki-chan replied to my messy words.

How should I put it… it's a reassuring line, but this is me; I've severed myself from everyone and everything. What kind of help could I possibly expect?

Could she be talking about Ougi-san or Tsukihi-chan?

Ononoki-chan pointed with her right hand of dirt towards my clueless self — more accurately, the pocket in my culottes.

Even more accurately, the two used sheets of paper in the pocket of my culottes.

‘Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko, the two shikigami you’ve sealed — I think you’ll find you have three Nadekos, Present Nadeko.’

021

A tangent (we will get back to the story, I promise): when drawing manga, there are several things I need to pay attention to as a beginner.

Character design and storylines are important, obviously, but although they may be fiction, they have to be grounded by some realities.

Plot convenience is of course to be avoided, but more importantly, one must remember that the characters bumbling about in the story are 'living' — specifically, eating, sleeping, going to the toilet, bathing; changing health, swinging moods; they tire, they recover, they learn and they forget; one must not forget to include such details.

In other words — *Alltag*.

Yes, the things often cast away when one is giving something their all.

Indeed, if this is ignored, characters become meaningless markers.

That said, excessive obsession with this would render that fictional plot non-existent; finding the right balance is the first step in advancing beyond a beginner. Alright, back to where we were.

My stomach was empty.

Having moved about all morning, being unimaginably active compared to my typical reclusion, going to and fro, climbing a mountain just now… it was noon.

Frankly, my physical and mental exhaustion were at their limit — if somebody told me 'it's okay to sleep', I would probably sleep soundly then and there.

'Hey you, is this really the time for eating?'

Ononoki-chan said, her face incredulous (no, expressionless); but one can't go to battle with an empty stomach — ah, a fantastic Japanese phrase.

The wonders of the Japanese language.

Ononoki-chan, being a corpse doll, seemed detached from this reality (for Ononoki-chan, wining and dining appear to be for fun. She probably likes ice cream for its temperature and smooth texture), but the same cannot be done for me.

Living is important.

It is a lesson I am learning right now.

Not only that, now that Ononoki-chan's strategy is coming up next, it becomes even more important — I do not want this to end with me unable to concentrate due to my hunger and losing the battle.

Adjusting my condition forms a part of my search.

So, I wanted at the very least to have an onigiri and a bottle of mineral water to wash it down with.

Fill up my unsplit stomach.

'You say it's like a manga, this feels more like a video game. The um, you know what I'm talking about, the ones where you're in a dungeon and you can die from starvation…'

‘Mm, roguelikes, they’re called. Quite a revolution in the genre.’

‘Thank you for teaching me. In return, you can eat my right hand.’

‘Isn’t that dirt I just moulded?’

Not that I would eat the bits outside the right hand either.

With that, I accompanied Ononoki-chan down the mountain and to the Sengoku household for a little reprieve — well, filling my stomach was one reason, but this interval was also for a little planning for the upcoming battle.

It was time to strategize.

One can go with the flow, and take them on with a single blow. A furious image; romantic, even, but ultimately self-destructive.

It sounds arrogant, having failed multiple times, but precisely because of these past mistakes, I wanted this next team battle to be executed with caution.

Having managed to return home in one piece, I originally wanted to change back into my own clothes, but since I was going incognito, I decided to keep wearing these borrowed clothes.

And definitely not because I like being in this cute dress, okay?

Even though I borrowed them on my own, Tsukihi-chan would probably not get mad over it, but if I asked her to lend them to me, she wouldn’t; such a mysterious personality is beyond me.

‘But Ononoki-chan, you could use a change of clothes as well.’

‘Mm? But I kinda like this avant-garde style with my belly button exposed.’

‘That’s not what I mean. You need to go incognito too.’

If I was the only one incognito, but Ononoki-chan looked the same way as she does, we would get discovered first.

Even if that did not happen, that belly-button-exposing avant-garde style was screaming for attention.

From Divine Nadeko’s perspective, were she to know that the supposedly-dismembered Ononoki-chan is after her again, it’d be quite frightening, but since she is an aberration, things would probably not go as well — given that, I should give her a full dress change.

In other words, a third Ononoki-chan.

Even if Ononoki-chan is detached from the reality of eating and drinking, she wouldn’t be detached from the reality of having to change clothes.

‘If you wore my clothes, then they’d see through you; see what you can find from mum and dad’s wardrobe. You can don my hat.’

‘The sizes are going to look really loose on me, I’m going to stand out…’

Ononoki-chan seemed disinterested, but then again, she was probably reflecting on her dismemberment.

‘Alright. I’ll find something that suits me. Like the ones that shrink once they get washed. Onee-chan might not like it, but I’ll model it after Gaen-san.’

She relented in the end.

So it’s ‘onee-chan’ who doesn’t like it.

Seems like her casual clothes that were really difficult to draw were co-ordinated with her, then.

With that, as Ononoki-chan changed, I prepared a meal in the kitchen.

I say prepare, I, Sengoku Nadeko, possess zero cooking talent, so I was looking for something instant.

My family is dual-income, so mum and dad sometimes prepare lunch for me in the morning, but sadly, no cling wrapped dishes in the fridge today.

We were in the middle of a cold war.

A cold war colder than the refrigerator.

It appears my supplies were being cut off.

Sodachi-onee-chan may have said what she said, but from this countermeasure, it seems my parents were determined to drag their beloved daughter away from a hikikomori life.

Tragically, it seems their stern words were not a one-off.

Although continuing on the theme of realities, to deprive food from a child forms, in a way, child abuse — ‘creating four shikigami to compress my workload hours’ was a completely wrong way to deal with

this, and I was fully living the consequences, but I could have made a less sensible choice.

To be like Anti-Nadeko, to throw my toys out of the pram, to resort to violence and swing chisels about — it would be incredible if my parents, others, and even myself came out of this unhurt.

Children really take off after their parents. Or do parents take off after their children?

These were thoughts I should not be having now, but in face of parents like these, what should I do to restore some of their faith in my piety?

I went ahead with my stupid thoughts.

Imagine drawing an ideal Sengoku Nadeko that my parents could be proud of, conjuring it as a shikigami from two dimensions to three, and letting her replace me.

This would not be a takeover, but an inheritance.

She would go to school like a normal kid, listen to her parents; honest and cute, quite clever, but awkward with words… goodness me, what should I call this Nadeko…

'Why're you grinning at an empty fridge? Freak.'

Ononoki-chan returned with new clothes.

Ononoki-chan, mode III.

Despite wearing adult clothes, no, because she's wearing adult clothes, she was, as she said, rocking a loose, casual look — so this is what Gaen-san probably looks like.

It was one thing seeing clothes like that on Ononoki-chan who looks like she's twelve

(though I don't know how old she actually is. She is an oddity. I have heard that oddities take over a hundred years to form), but it would be quite special to see an adult dressing like that.

I wonder what kind of person she is.

Would I be designated as a liability or as harmless? The fact that my fate rested on this one person's judgement made me nervous — it was a limited choice of clothing for her, but Ononoki-chan's quick changing has helped me out.

To return home due to an empty stomach makes reckoning with a lonely reality unavoidable.

To face life.

That may be important, but right now, I have to think about what to do with the two remaining Sengoku Nadekos. I have to have a full stomach for this.

'With that look, Ononoki-chan, you should wear a knit cap. It suits you.'

I ended up boiling some water and fixing myself some instant ramen — it may come as a shock, but Present Nadeko can boil water.

'So, again… Ononoki-chan, could you recap your strategy for me one more time? You say there's three of me…'

'Mm.'

I sat on the dining table, face-to-face with Ononoki-chan.

Come to think of it, it has been months since Ononoki-chan came to my room to play (to rant) and model for my sketches, but

every time that happens, she came in through my window to avoid being spotted by my parents, so this was the first time we were together on the ground floor.

The refrigerator may be empty, but there was ice cream in the freezer, so I served some for Ononoki-chan.

Bon appétit.

'As I was saying, if Divine Nadeko is teaming up with Gentle Nadeko, then we could have three Sengoku Nadekos on our side. You with the two shikigami you caught — Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko, three of you.'

'Mm. I know what you're trying to say, but…'

When she said it on the mountaintop in the Kitashirahebi Shrine, it felt like everything clicked, but upon closer, calmer thought, I felt things would go nowhere near as smoothly.

Based on that, having a bit of buffer time was the right call. When facing against Anti-Nadeko, I reacted as she went, without anything remotely resembling a strategy, in a fight that would have left me more dead than alive; even if this was a pro's battle plan, I still wanted to rehearse it step by step.

'Meaning it's three against two, so that we win on numbers, right?'

'Yes. Naturally, each Nadeko has their own features, so a simple majority-minority wouldn't be enough. Considering that you have set different personalities for each

character, they aren't clones, which means it only works on paper. But this presents an advantage for us. They couldn't use Fawning Nadeko's charm or Anti-Nadeko's physique, which makes it the best for us — by contrast, having already had her chisels taken away by Anti-Nadeko, all Gentle Nadeko can be is either bait or a human shield, so Divine Nadeko is the only one we have to plan around.'

'Indeed. I understand that.'

In addition, now that Ononoki-chan has received some first aid, whilst she couldn't use the 'Unlimited Rulebook', she is still capable in battle — I might be powerless, but anyway, powerless me would still contribute as much as I can.

Despite this, the proposal was still only good on paper.

Because.

'Relying on shikigami to solve the problem, or to turn the tide to our benefit… didn't we do this just this morning and failed miserably? We wanted the four shikigami to help, but ended up causing more trouble than they're worth, and they roamed free, didn't they?'

If this was like shogi, then it'd be great to have some shikigami pawns, but I don't think that was going to happen.

Even if I conjure Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko and enlist their help, surely they would end up running away?

'Ougi-san said I could comb through the town by drawing a hundred more Sengoku Nadekos, which I think isn't far off from what you've said…'

'Oshino Ougi was probably kidding when he said it, but that lil' scamp's jokes cut to the centre of the matter to a frustrating extent. That's of course a stupid idea, but Sengoku Nadeko, are you seriously just going to take it after you've failed?'

'What?'

'If you've failed on your first try and don't give it a second go, that's not really the attitude someone pursuing their dreams should have — we did fail in controlling our shikigami, so we just make it work next time.'

'……'

No, that's true.

You do make it sound optimistic though.

Besides, this avoidance of hard work was, I think, the reason why this Sengoku household ended up with that Gentle Nadeko; sure, it did not work the first time, but to then preclude this option from consideration really was not forward thinking.

My own weaknesses should be overcome.

This should be the part where powerless little me started to work for it.

…But this was after all challenging the lessons on safety once again; to take on a challenge without any warm-up or practice was not exactly courage; it was recklessness.

Rather, the wish to fix one's failures, to finish a fundamentally mistaken will, could

be what leads to failure after failure, inflicting ever greater levels of harm.

'If you are against this, then I wouldn't force you to do it. After all, it's not the only option we have… but you mention one's will; have you forgotten what your original goal is, Sengoku Nadeko?'

'Original goal? Isn't that forming a rotation with the shikigami and reaching that ten-thousand-hour goal?'

'There's something else: to be certified harmless by Gaen-san, no? Your status is still pending, so you need to make yourself useful and present your appeal — to clean this up, that is your goal.'

Ah, that.

Of course I had not forgotten — this was also the same reason why despite (to put it lightly) less-than-ideal circumstances, seeking help from other specialists was not an option.

But when listening to her scheme again, if I did this on my own (in the presence of alternative options) and overcame this hurdle, the most that can be guaranteed was to not be regarded as a dangerous troublemaker, and for Ononoki-chan to not receive a penalty, but no matter what, since I had let my shikigami loose, I as an observational target was not going to see any points awarded my way.

To be designated harmless was a goal that will not be achieved — no, thinking of it

fairly, that was not going to change in the long term.

Precisely because of that, I needed to fight.

For me to understand only after Ononoki-chan laid it bare multiple times; I really am obtuse.

But she was right.

Making it through the present is not enough.

One must look forward.

My thoughts towards Gentle Nadeko was something I had to say to myself too — I have a future.

Using shikigami to reach ten thousand hours was well and truly scrapped, but even so, now that things have gone like this, I should at least find a way to get that harmless certification.

For a future, for a dream, I needed avarice.

'Understood. I'll do it, Ononoki-chan. Nmm, let me do it. Please let me do it.'

I said. Whilst slurping my ramen.

'Just to confirm, Ougi-san's suggestion was a joke, right?'

'Mm. Drawing new and other yous is inadvisable. I said you could repeat your failures, but I said nothing about making the exact same failure — it's a meaningless loop. Essentially, this is trial-and-error, and try again. Now that one has failed, one should learn something from that. Especially for Araragi Tsukihi.'

'……'

Even in this crisis, Ononoki-chan still found time to rant about Tsukihi-chan.

Which also meant, since Ononoki-chan usually partners up with Tsukihi-chan (just a quick mention, Tsukihi-chan seems to treat Ononoki-chan as a doll possessed by the soul of a magical girl), to lecture a problem child like myself was probably no difficult task for her.

I hope I could listen in on their conversations someday.

I am interested to see Ononoki-chan as a magical girl.

Anyway, thank goodness I did not have to draw a hundred Sengoku Nadekos — even with a dream of becoming a manga artist, drawing a hundred versions of the same person was beyond my abilities.

Beyond a pro's abilities, even.

'You mentioned learning from failures, so I'm going to have to summon Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko properly this time, haven't I?'

'You're right. Unlike this morning, you have already faced these two shikigami once, and no matter how they happened, they are already firmly sealed away; they were defeated, the role between master and servant has been clearly delineated — therefore, when you open up the folded pages, there is a high likelihood that they'll listen to you this time.'

I wouldn't go ahead and suggest something reckless, Ononoki-chan said, as

she scooped up more ice cream with a wooden spoon.

'With that said, there is a worst-case scenario.'

'A worst-case scenario?'

'Against Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko, the moment you let Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko free, they rush over to the other side; let alone a three-versus-two, this becomes a one-versus-four.'

That would be disastrous.

I would be clobbered on all four sides.

'Well, that is the worst case, and on the subject of more predictions, there is also the optimistic case of Gentle Nadeko, having been only used as bait by Divine Nadeko, to switch sides, turning it into a four-versus-one scenario. But this conversation would never end if we talk about permutations, and this is not a roll of the dice anyway — in the end, it all depends on the power of your guts.'

The power of my guts, I see.

I have never heard of that power before.

Where was I going to find that within my powerless self?

I even wished she would say something such as spiritual power or witchlike power, but in the end, it all depended on willpower.

'I'll of course support you on the technical side. To borrow from shoujo manga, Sengoku Nadeko, the time has come for you to surpass your former self.'

Why today, of all days? Wasn't this for when someone has gone through some growth and was facing a challenge?

All I did was fight with my parents.

'Shut your cakehole. If you don't quit your babbling, I'll end this story right here by saying you, the narrator, are a shikigami all along.'

Please don't presage a not-entirely-implausible conclusion like that this early.

'……'

But one doesn't get to choose their own days anyway — if anything, this has been long overdue.

Gentle Nadeko, refusing to face forward.

Fawning Nadeko, only living for everyone around her.

Anti-Nadeko, always crazed.

Divine Nadeko, feigning holiness and purity.

All of them, me. All of them, connected to me.

Therefore, I am the one who is going to connect all of them with me.

Before all this, when facing Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko, I honestly did not have the spare power to think this much about it. To prevent a panic, to save myself from that blade, I had no epiphany, I was not aware, all I did was try and survive what was in front of me — but I can no longer do the same for what follows.

I'm full.

Onwards to battle.

022

The battleground was the bookstore.

The only large bookstore around here.

This type of bookstore, where it stocks every genre, was only here because this was a rural town; anyway, this was the place where I buy my books.

Ononoki-chan's right hand on Divine Nadeko's back became a transmitter, and we set off as the crow flies from the Sengoku household, ending up in front of this two-storey building.

'Dear me. If I had the "Unlimited Rulebook", this would have been over in one leap. I can't take it. Do humans always live this painfully as ground-crawlers?'

Please don't call us ground-crawlers.

I had no idea how to respond to this sudden burst of character.

Speaking of, I only remembered just now, I left Ougi-san's BMX outside the Araragi household — because I fled the place without a second thought.

I completely forgot about that.

Well, even if that bike was still there, it was a BMX difficult enough to put any beginner off, and I would not want to transport Ononoki-chan on that… my desire to go near the Araragi household was even lower now, so I will have to ask Tsukihi-chan to get the bike back.

I do pray that by putting the bike there, they'd think it was Ougi-san who destroyed the door — speaking of, where was Ougi-san? And what was he up to?

Don't tell me he got tired of this and went home.

Moving on, the fact that Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko based themselves in the bookstore came as a surprise. Normally, I would expect somewhere more hidden, not a place filled with people.

But that does not mean I did not have a hunch.

Those past days in the Kitashirahebi Shrine, when I was slicing up countless snakes, that inhuman act was to lift myself from a curse, but back then, the basis for that cruelty was knowledge I got from the bookstore.

That book in the occult section, *A Complete Collection of Snake Curses*, that was the source of my massacre.

Come to think of it, instead of saying this was going around places, today seemed more like a trip down Sengoku Nadeko's past haunts.

Not every place I left with good memories though…

I heard the word 'nostalgia' from Sodachi-onee-chan, if I remember correctly.

Then would the next location be the primary school where I first met Tsukihi-chan? No, there was no next stop; this is where it ends.

'By the way, Ononoki-chan.'

'What is it, Nadeko-chan?'

She's closer to me now.

Was this another shift in her character?

I really cannot be sure.

'Now that we are here, there's no point in asking this, but what was the other option you had in mind, Ononoki-chan? That is, the other plan you had if I refused to combat by summoning my shikigami…'

'Indeed, now that we are here, there is indeed no point in asking this, and it is a last resort. I will only say it now, but it was a solution I proposed in order to convince you not to go with it; I do not want to use it at all.'

'You say "I will only say it now", it's hasn't even been an hour…?'

'To ask the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade for help. The Aberration Slayer now designated harmless — the Iron-Blooded, Hot-Blooded, Cold-Blooded vampire.'

'……'

Was that also a *Kizumonogatari* joke?

It's still not funny; I stayed silent.

'Nono, whilst it is difficult to say if it can be done, the idea itself was completely serious. Can't count on the leader of the specialists Gaen-san to help, and Divine Nadeko's successor, that god who likes roaming around, would also be a difficult ask, but if it's the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, she's a free agent, and more or less an acquaintance; get somebody

already certified harmless and let her "eat" the two remaining shikigami, that really is the simplest solution.'

'…But I remember Divine Nadeko's the one who mutilated the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade — Shinobu-chan?'

Ononoki-chan did say with only her head that vampires are blood-type aberrations, and don't fare well against venom.

Though technically, it was not Divine Nadeko who mutilated her over and over, it was me.

'Yes, absolutely. That is the point. Divine Nadeko is in the end, only a shikigami. It might be a god, but more than that, it's a sheet of paper. This is unlike last year's killings — and the location is also no longer the spiritual realm that is the Kitashirahebi Shrine.'

'…But —'

'I know. I know what you want to say, but couldn't.'

Ononoki-chan said, as if trying to stop me from mouthing a second 'but'.

'If we do introduce the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade into the equation, "that man" will come as well. Once "that man" of tactlessness intervenes, everything will become unpredictable… no simulation can handle it. Even so, from where I stand, it is desirable in a way, but it would be inconvenient and difficult for you, wouldn't it, Naddie?'

‘…Thanks for being considerate.’

I have problems with accepting Naddie, that much is certain.

‘Nadeko-chan’ sure lasted a long time, huh.

‘Mm. So whilst this would prove effective, the chances of it working are low. However, if I deem your life to be in danger the longer this goes on, I will go against your wishes — if that situation comes, I will ask for assistance, be it from the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, Gaen-san, or the newly appointed god.’

It appears this was the pro’s line in the sand.

I cannot help but worry here about where Ononoki-chan will go once this problem is over.

‘I will think of my way somehow.’

She lightly brushed me off.

‘My own problems, my own solutions.’

With her saying that, I cannot really ask any further — I couldn’t think of my own solutions to my own problems; all I can think of is my own incompetence.

‘It’s okay. You’ve helped me tons by letting me rant about Araragi Tsukihi.’

So it’s that important a task?

Anyway, from where I was sitting, in order to keep Ononoki-chan’s position and dignity, I will have to go with the original plan — that said, a battle in a bookstore was not what I want, so I did want to settle this peacefully somewhere quiet.

It was not a mere offhand remark.

I can only guess as to why Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko used the bookstore as their safehouse, but once I trepidly stepped in, I realised how good a hiding place a bookstore is.

I have never viewed a bookstore this way before, but dense rows of bookshelves provide plenty of cover; you never know where an enemy would pop out — in shooter terms, there's tons of room for reloading.

But with that said, this was not only advantageous to the enemy… we could confirm Divine Nadeko's position with Ononoki-chan's right hand, so a bookstore was not the worst battleground.

I analysed it the way I would a video game, but it seems things were not so simple.

The reason I say that was not due to places for cover, but because the bookstore was empty — no, this being the middle of a weekday, it would not be unusual if it was crowded; for us, the culprits, it was nice that nobody innocent had to get involved either, but not only were there no customers, the staff were gone as well.

Which meant 'the bookstore was empty' was neither metaphor nor exaggeration.

There was not a single soul in the bookstore.

'……?'

'A barrier? No, that's not right. It doesn't follow the rules if it's one. Probably a special shikigami technique. 'Fraid it's Gentle Nadeko.'

As I was bewildered by the odd sight of an empty bookstore, Ononoki-chan said that.

'This empty store could be something Gentle Nadeko craves — to evade arrest despite being a downright pervert, probably implies the presence of a skill; a "deflective barrier born from fear of human contact".'

Hm.

It would be weird if I started digging deeper, but if Gentle Nadeko had this skill with her, then it would explain why, despite multiple witness testimonies, she was not arrested or caught — after all, she led not only myself or Ougi-san, but Ononoki-chan as well, deep into the mountains.

But Ononoki-chan's little counterattack then proved plenty useful now — although I originally thought Gentle Nadeko would be caught earlier on, now that I knew she had such abilities, she could have evaded us forever, but thanks to Ononoki-chan's right hand, we knew the girls were in the bookstore.

'This way.'

Ononoki-chan said whilst slowing down her pace, as we stealthily made our way across the forest of bookshelves, going ever deeper.

This two-storey bookstore now has the ground floor stocking fiction, magazines, textbooks and reference books, and the upper floor comics, picture books and children's books — even so, Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko would not necessarily be

in the upper floor… I trotted cautiously as I took out two sheets of folded paper from my pocket, one in each hand.

They were not blank sheets for capturing.

On my right hand, a drawing of Fawning Nadeko.

On my left hand, a drawing of Anti-Nadeko.

I prepared myself for the moment when I needed to 'activate' them.

'I'll say this one more time… Naddie, no matter what happens, remember to "activate" the shikigami one by one.'

Ononoki-chan faced forward and lowered her voice.

I almost forgot.

The tension and anxiety made me take out both sheets at once, even as Ononoki-chan gave me this advice before entering the bookstore.

Ultimately, this was the main reason for this morning's failure — simultaneously conjuring four shikigami resulted in me being unable to restrain or control them.

Now that she put it like that, she's right.

Until now, I have not required the help of shikigami, not even when I was a god; even though all my shikigami were myselves, there was no way I could ask for four of them to help me at once.

This was probably what Ougi-san meant when he said Ononoki-chan's miscalculation being me successfully summoning all four shikigami at once.

Hence, it must be done one by one.

Sheet by sheet.

It may be true that I had a greater number of Sengoku Nadekos on my side (three versus two), but an all-out team match was something better avoided.

If one had to say it, basically, they should be dealt with one by one too.

Once discovering a shikigami, I will lead an attack with one of the two Nadekos I have sealed — not one round of three-versus-two, but two rounds of two-versus-one.

That would be ideal.

Which meant it probably would not happen, but even so, activating both shikigami at once was completely off the table.

It might end up with a real one-versus-four.

Therefore, I had to read the air and summon a shikigami that suited the situation; two extremes in the form of Fawning Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko.

Fawning Nadeko for negotiating, Anti-Nadeko for fighting.

I did not want to mix them up.

'Mm… looks like they're above us.'

Ononoki-chan pointed with her right index finger made from dirt.

Above… that means the upper floor, right.

Then according to what I know about them, they were probably in the comics section — no, in this crucial hour, Gentle

Nadeko was probably not going to want to buy any manga.

Having heard that, that also meant Divine Nadeko is not on the ground floor, where we were; I felt a little relieved.

No, that was no good.

To be relieved is another way of saying to let my guard down — even without mentioning that, now that Ononoki-chan was leading the way, I might have forgotten that she was only here as support.

A mere hint of relief.

A mere hint of relief made me slow down as Ononoki-chan approached the staircase to the upper floor.

Although my pace was slow to begin with too.

Besides, I biked and hiked all morning; the exhaustion I picked up going around town was not going to disappear with only an hour's break at home.

Therefore, although I wished to stick to Ononoki-chan as closely as I can, I ended up about one metre behind her — this one metre became my Achilles' heel.

Upon knowing we had to go up one floor, most of my attention was already focused on the upper floor, but whilst scooting past the bookshelves, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

I managed to catch something Ononoki-chan missed; only in retrospect did I feel there was something wrong with that, but it was also inevitable — Ononoki-chan was

now fully committed, fully concentrated on getting that severed right hand of hers back, which meant me, lounging behind her, noticed something other than that right hand; even so, it was not something worth bragging about.

Besides, I did not want to brag about it at all.

It was not praiseworthy in the slightest.

Because far out opposite the stairs, I found Gentle Nadeko in a school swimsuit, standing there, reading a book.

Was that really something I can be proud of?

023

If Gentle Nadeko half-naked in gym shorts was called Bloomer Nadeko, then I should call Gentle Nadeko in a school swimsuit Speedo Nadeko — she wore only beach sandals on her feet, probably to match the swimsuit. Because there was some distance between us, and because she was facing the bookshelf, I cannot tell for sure if that was Gentle Nadeko, but in an emptied bookstore — actually, no, even in a normal bookstore — the only person I can think of who would stand and read books wearing a school swimsuit would be Sengoku Nadeko.

Wait, even I have never read books whilst stood in a school swimsuit, have I?

To that end, the reason I dressed like that in Kitashirahebi Shrine was to lift the snake curse — though in a sense it was an equally blasphemous act, there was at least some rational thought behind it.

Because of that, Gentle Nadeko looking like that (plus because I was smartly dressed based on Tsukihi-chan's fashion sense) was a sight I cannot bear looking at.

Anyway, I had finally located Gentle Nadeko, who I've been looking for this entire morning — have they not noticed us?

I always thought that Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko were moving together, so I never expected them to appear in separate floors.

Count me flabbergasted.

Ever since becoming a hikikomori, I have never been to the bookstore… is Speedo Nadeko looking at books in the occult section?

The bookshelf where I obtained the wrong information on lifting the curse… no, I remember Oshino Meme-san saying that the ceremony itself was done right.

There were so many mistakes back then that it was difficult to be sure which part of it went wrong.

'Ono…'

I stopped halfway before the -noki-chan could escape from my mouth.

This was an empty bookstore, devoid of any background music too. Any noise I made would reverberate across the entire place, making Gentle Nadeko notice — this was too good of a chance to waste that.

If I could pull Gentle Nadeko over to our side and face Divine Nadeko with a four-on-one, then a fight might not even be necessary — it could end with a demand for surrender.

Surrender.

A new state of being for a deity.

However, I cannot just call (draw) her out, or stop her in her tracks; as I stopped, Ononoki-chan continued her advance — should I grab her shoulder? No, my footsteps would definitely be heard. I was wearing sandals, so they will go patan-patan. Curses, I should have changed into sneakers whilst I was home…!

‘……!’

I went ahead hastily, turned, and stepped away from Ononoki-chan — strolling towards the back of Speedo Nadeko, her racerback clear for all to see; I kept my lips tight, my feet travelling silently on the ground, even if it meant I moved slower.

This was a mistake.

This was so obviously a mistake.

This can only be described as a thoroughly incorrect action.

But, at that time, it felt like the only thing I can do — I thought if I got Gentle Nadeko on my side, this entire circus could be brought down in one fell swoop.

I was certain.

The image of Ononoki-chan battered, bruised and decimated had been completely burnt into my brain. I will not allow it happening a second time.

Current me cannot justify any logic that says ‘it’s just a corpse, it doesn’t matter if it’s hacked to bits’. It was an identical logic to ‘it’s just a snake, it doesn’t matter if it’s hacked to bits’.

Therefore, if I could catch Gentle Nadeko before confronting Divine Nadeko, I reckoned this was a chance I could absolutely not let slip.

But I was wrong.

In the end, Ononoki-chan’s dismemberment came as a result of Divine Nadeko using Gentle Nadeko as bait — then that Gentle Nadeko standing there and

reading could also be the same thing; why did I not think of that then?

This really was just repeating the exact same failure — an easy solution that ended up with me as the catch.

But right then, I did not even realise I was messing things up, or that I went alone in a team operation.

I do not have any concept of teamwork.

Once this became a team battle, all I have managed to do was to undermine it.

I really am useless.

Alternatively, it could be an overreaction, a panic from an emergency situation — I haven't made myself a manga character again, have I?

To flatly ignore reality.

To dump all the dry detective work to Ononoki-chan.

But I still had my own thoughts — I slowly approached Speedo Nadeko's back, and concentrated on my right hand.

On the paper is the sealed Fawning Nadeko — yes, even if I was facing Gentle Nadeko, I would not want to talk it through one-on-one, or surprise her with a sheet of white paper; things do not go that perfectly in my head.

Now was the moment when Fawning Nadeko, someone with terrifying social skills, sprang into action.

Make it a 'two-against-one'.

To win against Divine Nadeko in a battle of words would probably require someone of

Kaiki-san's calibre, but if it was Gentle Nadeko, then Fawning Nadeko should do the trick… it's difficult to find somebody more willing to go with the flow than her.

Going with the flow because she's wearing a school swimsuit — no, she wears a school swimsuit because she goes with the flow, or goes enticingly half-naked with only gym shorts.

Well, this was not Gentle Nadeko, this was my own past, but having been deprived of her clothes, and stolen of her chisels, she almost bows down to every other shikigami.

Therefore — mm?

Wait…

I just felt this dissonance that came from nowhere… erm, have I missed something?

In terms of missing something, the moment I acted on my own and left Ononoki-chan was as careless an act can be, but that was not what I am talking about; I have missed something even more fundamental…

The problem is, my brain runs slower than my ambling, quiet legs ridden with lactic acid; before I realised the source of this dissonance, I was already behind Speedo Nadeko.

Speedo Nadeko was indeed in the occult books section — presumably reading something about snakes.

Quite right.

Around this time last year, albeit not in a school swimsuit, I was found whilst also standing and reading books here.

Found here.

'……'

If I was not found then — if it was the wrong time, if I came another day, another hour to this bookstore, what would have happened to me?

Would I have died from the curse…?

No, in the end, the time when the specialist Oshino Meme-san took care of the air pocket that is the Kitashirahebi Shrine, or the time when the Tsuganoki Second Middle School's Fire Sisters took action on the 'curse' spreading around Public Middle School #701, that encounter and that reunion, they were both something unavoidable, weren't they.

…Something unavoidable?

Did I want to avoid it?

I was so jolly back then…

The moment my heart sank, as if grabbing onto this long-awaited opportunity, when I was only a few steps away from Speedo Nadeko's exposed back, exposed because she was Speedo Nadeko — it started.

Rather than say it has started, it collapsed.

It collapsed — the bookshelf.

Packed tightly with deluxe thick hardcovers, the shelf — as if trying to crush me, to kill me, fell without any sign.

'Uh…'

That's another something.

Something unavoidable.

024

When I die, I want to be crushed by a shelf of books.

What a great sentence.

I am but a manga-reading middle schooler, but even so, I still get happy out of nowhere whenever I see a tall bookshelf, filled to the brim with books.

So I can relate to that.

At least, I thought I could relate to that.

But when it actually happens, as an entire wall, an entire bookshelf falls with a snap, the books flying out not like raindrops, but like an avalanche; witnessing this scene, relatability has flown out the window and off to outer space.

I do not want to die crushed by a bookshelf.

But I will.

'Ahh, so this is death', I thought to myself.

Of all the ways to die, this…

Coiled by snakes, becoming a deity, constantly self-deprecating — somewhere within me, I had the notion that my life was maybe even unique, curious, and special — therefore this cause of death came as a surprise.

But it made sense.

Be it an overly dramatic life, be it laden with fortune or suffering, be it heroes or villains, nobody knows how they will die.

‘When I die, I’d like to die like this’; that is an impossible dream — even if one can choose the way they go out, the most one can do is eliminating other options.

Therefore, people should choose the way they live life — ahh, if only I knew this; I should have had a big ruckus with everybody.

I should have made peace with everybody.

Indeed.

With Shinobu-chan, even Senjougahara-san, maybe then —

‘……’

I say all this, I still wanted to put up a bit of a fight, and think about better ways to die; however, no matter how long I waited, that final blow never appeared.

What’s going on; could it be, when one was at their limit, everything moves in slow motion?

So it’s not manga expressionism, it’s real?

I thought as I slowly opened my eyes — when the bookshelf fell, not only did I not run away reflexively, I fell on my knees, in a place where I can only stare at the bookshelf about to crush me; however, that bookshelf is static, tilted at forty-five degrees.

The towering bookshelf blocked my view, so everything was properly dark, yet even so, I was still alive — not totally unscathed, since although the bookshelf stopped falling, the great number of books in it did not.

Those deluxe hardcovers were not soft at all; they mercilessly battered my body, so I probably did rack up some damage. I

wouldn't be surprised if I was bleeding or if I broke a bone somewhere.

But, even so. Despite this.

Compared to being flattened by a bookshelf, this was some light damage — it was not the adjacent bookshelf that saved me by propping up this bookshelf at forty-five degrees.

The bookshelf on the other end had completely gone down. On its side.

More to the point, from the gap I can see through, all the bookshelves on this floor fell down like dominoes.

There was no earthquake; what caused this, I don't know — no, I knew full well, but I did not want to comprehend it.

I did not want to realise how shallow I was.

Amidst the chaos, the only bookshelf that had not fell flat was this bookshelf, perched at forty-five degrees — as to why, it's obvious; it had a support.

Somebody was supporting it.

Unlike bookshelves at home, for something this heavy to fall seemed unimaginable; the person who stopped it from falling completely flat was none other than Sengoku Nadeko — however, this Sengoku Nadeko was obviously not myself, sat on the floor embarrassingly.

Wearing a uniform and a pair of court shoes, the Sengoku Nadeko who spread her arms and legs in supporting the bookshelf was —

'F-Fawning Nadeko!'

'…If it wan't for an uncool name like that, Ah might've stood by your side from the start —'

Promise.

She said it, against her will.

She smiled sweetly, against her will — even there and then.

However, with her fringes pulled back by her headband, her smile, her face, her thoughts, her pain, I can see them all.

'— but, you got a real cute set of clothes. Ah want it too. Where didya buy it, Present Nadeko-chan?'

'Ah, th-this, I borrowed from my friend, Tsukihi-chan —'

What is with this chatting; now was *not* the time.

The cruel name was not my idea, but Ononoki-chan's, but I could not bring myself to say it.

Of course, I knew why she was here — up until now, I was going to open the sheet that sealed Fawning Nadeko to get Gentle Nadeko on my side.

It seemed the mess caused by the falling bookshelf made my hand slip — releasing Fawning Nadeko from her seal, and conjuring her once again.

Conjured in the eleventh hour.

And whilst I should have been buried alive by a pile of books, crushed dead by a bookshelf, Fawning Nadeko came to my rescue — propping the bookshelf up herself.

‘Aah geez, Ah’m, really lame — giving it mah everythin’. The heck am Ah doing…’

‘……!’

For her to say that, whilst maintaining that posture, that support, I had nothing to say to Fawning Nadeko — she was an aberration.

She was indeed a shikigami, an aberration.

But unlike Ononoki-chan, Shinobu-chan, or Divine Nadeko, she had no superpower, no super strength.

I did not draw her like that.

Her true specialty is sociability; her hands were weaker than even an average middle school girl’s — only slightly stronger than the long-time hikikomori, the almost sickly Present Nadeko; she now supported an entire bookstore bookshelf.

The bookshelf was heavy on its own, but even with all the books falling on this side, the other side was still stuffed with books — it would easily weigh over a tonne.

This was not easy, no?

‘Hehe… Present Nadeko-chan. If y’ could, get out from that gap, that’d be, much appreciated. Not a lie, all true thoughts. Ah’ve never done anything like me life depended on it, so please; Ah can’t take this much longer…’

‘Aa, ah, aah —’

At least if it was Anti-Nadeko.

If it was Anti-Nadeko, whose muscles were entirely delimited, she could probably take it even if this bookshelf collapsed entirely.

But the one I summoned was Fawning Nadeko — since I could not control two shikigami at once, I could not do a swap.

The moment Fawning Nadeko was sealed, before even being able to summon Anti-Nadeko, I, the magician, was about to be crushed by a bookshelf — there was nothing I could do. There was nothing I could do for her.

Crack. Snap.

The source of that crushing noise was no longer the bookshelf.

'W-why save me?'

'Who knows. Prolly 'cos I'm not content?'

I asked an incomprehensible question, and this was the response I got — aah, but it is true.

Not because I could use my shikigami well — to be conjured in this situation, Fawning Nadeko had little choice but to prop up the falling bookshelf.

'S-sorry, I'm really sorry, it's all my fault — '

It was all my immaturity.

My inadequacies made my drawings nothing like the characters I had in mind; as I was wracked by this self-tormenting guilt, Fawning Nadeko raised her voice: 'It's alright! No need to apologise!'

She sounded bright now.

'What you could do next time is draw me cuter. Gimme those clothes you're wearing for a start. Oh ye, these pair a' pumps are a great example; Present Nadeko-chan, y' lack

detail when it comes to shoes. Y've fell into the habit of drawing 'em last, haven't you? You're always wearing sandals, which means y' never care about the feet. Gimme some shoes that match next time. Promise?'

'…Mm. I promise.'

Those were all the words I could squeeze.

I fumbled and swam through the sea of books, and crawled out under the giant bookshelf — only just.

The moment I was out, no, before my left foot was even out, the bookshelf perched at forty-five degrees collapsed as if there was never a support.

It warped under its own weight.

Presumably the many books underneath were no longer readable — let alone the girls underneath.

They must have been like a sheet of paper.

Completely crushed.

'It's a promise… I will redraw you properly next time.'

The next time, you will no longer be an empty shell.

You will be an honest reflection of my aspirations.

I made up my mind whilst pulling my foot out from the pile. With hardcovers as a buffer, I set my foot free surprisingly easily — I had more damage from the book avalanche earlier, relatively speaking.

I stood up, prayers racing in my head.

Thanks to Fawning Nadeko, I narrowly escaped death, but I could have sustained

injuries that prevent me from going to the front lines.

But if I don't stand up here and now, I have lost.

I hope I can stand up.

Even with, for instance, a fractured bone, I will not be deterred — I stood up.

Perhaps shakily, but I stood up.

Then again, there was no reason for hope — the sight that greeted me after making it out under the bookshelf was pure despair.

Every single bookshelf on the ground floor had toppled, that was the despairing image in front of me.

A nightmarish flood of books, underneath waves of stacked, warped bookshelves — I cannot imagine how this hellish landscape can be restored.

How many thousands of books have been sacrificed?

Is this what Divine Nadeko was willing to do in order to eliminate me — having made up my mind to enter the world of publishing, this was a sorry sight.

A different kind of pain, unlike when Ononoki-chan was in pieces — oh right, where's Ononoki-chan!?

'Ononoki-chan!'

'Over here'

The voice came from the opposite corner, now unobscured by bookshelves — right at the corner of the stairs leading to the upper floor.

It seemed that by being there, Ononoki-chan avoided the crashing wave of bookshelves — rather than say she was lucky, it might be fairer to say that Ononoki-chan was not in Divine Nadeko's sights, but me and me alone. Naturally, however, anybody who stands in her way would have been met with an equally swift end.

Ononoki-chan tapped her way over here, her steps light, as if trying not to damage any books.

'I was having trouble finding you. By the looks of it, Naddie, you've activated your shikigami.'

'Mm… I've used Fawning Nadeko.'

I've broken her.

With a heavy, torn heart, I told Ononoki-chan everything that transpired.

'I see. Well, I've made the same mistake as you, so I'm not in a position to blame you — besides, even if I told you don't mind, it'd be meaningless consolation to your ears, but I can tell you this: a shikigami's one true desire is to protect their master.

'Take it from me, a shikigami.'

Ononoki-chan said — indeed, it does only sound like consolation, but because of that, it was comforting.

'Also, Fawning Nadeko didn't perish alone… from what you've said, Gentle Nadeko, used as bait, was also crushed alongside.'

'Ah —'

Now that she mentioned it.

I thoughtlessly lost track of the Sengoku Nadeko over there, but given that the bookshelves of the entire floor collapsed in that one moment, Gentle Nadeko would not be unscathed if she was stood there reading.

Speedo Nadeko.

Standing there, holding a book with both her hands; there was probably nothing she could have done — right there.

She drowned in that sea of books.

Crushed by many, many occult books, flattened like a sheet of paper.

I cannot believe it. I don't want to believe it.

Even though it's a god, I don't want to believe it.

In order to flatten me, she used Gentle Nadeko — more than just a decoy.

If I treated Fawning Nadeko as breakable, Divine Nadeko treated Gentle Nadeko as disposable.

'……'

Not that both of them were that different.

Perhaps it was me putting aside what I have done, and more to that, trying to shift the guilt of using Fawning Nadeko like that into blaming somebody else.

In the end, Divine Nadeko, Fawning Nadeko, and Gentle Nadeko are my shikigami, so I really was just wrestling against myself.

However, even with everything —

I was still mad over it.

Even if I had Fawning Nadeko's social skills, I still do not think I should end this peacefully.

'That means in terms of Sengoku Nadekos, we've got two and they've got one; it's a two-versus-one match — if anything, it's all still going to plan. Divine Nadeko is still on the upper floor. We should do this quick, before she realises this trap didn't kill us and makes her escape.'

Ononoki-chan's calm, professional voice did nothing to keep my cool.

025

Now that Gentle Nadeko was flattened, her shikigami technique of a 'deflective barrier born from fear of human contact' should also fade as time goes on.

Therefore, we must finish this private ruckus as soon as possible, lest staff or customers saunter in.

If this bookstore was seen in this sorry state, I could be misunderstood as a teenager having too much stress and going on a destructive, pubescent rampage — no, that would not be a misunderstanding; aside from a few skipped steps, that would be supremely spot on.

My failure in controlling my shikigami has caused massive damages to this bookstore; a truly dizzying thought — and when thinking of the responsibilities, I cannot take it.

'No, I don't think anyone would think that this chaos could be caused by you, a single middle school girl, or any single person, for that matter — sorry for bursting your bubble, but your guilt cannot be assuaged by legal means. If you do feel sorry for this store, then be a great manga artist and hold a book signing here in future.'

Good point.

If I don't become a popular manga artist, there was no hope of me returning this debt… this was suddenly a lot more than finding a job after graduating middle school.

The stakes have been raised once again.

I carefully avoided stepping on the scattered books on the floor, following the path Ononoki-chan walked, and reached the stairs to the upper floor.

It was quite a lot of work getting here in the first place.

When I face Divine Nadeko on the upper floor, at least don't topple any bookshelves or damage books… I swore to myself as I turned on the landing — and then.

'……'

The sight on the ground floor made me speechless. This sight on the upper floor did the same, but not in the same way.

The pathetic sight of collapsed bookshelves and scattered books on the ground floor can only be described as despairing; the pathetic sight on the upper floor can only be described as decadent.

The upper floor — comics, picture books, children's books.

All bookshelves and books were where they were supposed to be, however, unlike the ground floor, the upper floor was not empty.

With that said, they were not customers or staff either — the people crowding the entire floor, perhaps a hundred of them, they were all me.

They were all Sengoku Nadekos.

More than that, they were all half-naked wearing only gym shorts, aka Bloomer Nadekos — names aside, there was no look

lamer than this, but anyway, there were about a hundred Sengoku Nadekos, all with their long fringes, occupying the entire floor.

Some looked for comics whilst cupping their breasts with both hands, some were picking picture books with one hand covering their breasts, and some laid them bare for all to see whilst reading children's books — no, that entire side of the bookstore was supposed to be for kids, yet this sight that greeted me as I ascended those stairs was completely X-rated.

Also, to see a cultured place such as a bookstore being smothered with these girls felt particularly immoral.

By the way, since I was criticised just now for not putting in enough work on the feet; probably in the same way I put beach sandals on Speedo Nadeko simply because they matched, these Nadekos all wore gym shoes to match their gym shorts.

It may be better than being barefoot, but it is only better than being barefoot.

Even death might be better than this.

'……'

I could not muster even a shriek.

Normally emotionless and well-spoken, Ononoki-chan was also silent.

What kind of situation would render even Ononoki-chan speechless?

I see, now I know why there were more witnesses for Bloomer Nadeko than Speedo Nadeko — the former simply outnumbered the latter.

An utterly insignificant truth.

I was originally wondering how they set up such a large trap that involved all bookshelves collapsing, but if there were a hundred of them working, then setting a trap would not have been a challenge regardless of size.

But who was the one who mass-produced this many Bloomer Nadekos, and how did they do it?

Much earlier, Ougi-san made the suggestion of me drawing another hundred Nadekos, which Ononoki-chan also said was not a bad idea on its own, but it should have been shot down with the reason that an outsider such as myself had no hope of controlling a hundred shikigami at once.

'Even a pro would find managing a hundred shikigami difficult — unless they are a god who can conjure a hundred thousand snakes.'

'…But, even so, to draw a hundred variations on the same character —'

Halfway through that sentence, I glanced once again at that horrid sight.

They looked — identical.

Everybody the same Gentle Nadeko, as if pressed from a mould — Bloomer Nadekos.

'Hm. I feel like she drew one and then used the photocopier. Aha, so that's something that can be done. How modern. But going back, a shikigami summoning shikigami is already frightening, but a shikigami producing shikigami… that's absurd. Gentle

Nadeko's a neutral, basic type, so I've always felt that 'deflective barrier born from fear of human contact' was too strong for something like her, but if it's a hundred of them working at once, then I can accept that. I thought we had to deal with this quick, before other people entered the store, but by the looks of it, we needn't worry about that', said Ononoki-chan.

No, looking at that part alone did give cause for optimism, but surely it doesn't cancel out the astonishing sight of a hundred Bloomer Nadekos?

My callous judgement resulted in the hopeless destruction of the ground floor, of which I express my most sincere regrets; but I wasn't expecting to be punished like this…

'Indeed. The challenges so far have been dealt with differently every single time, but I can say this for certain now, this is one volume where an anime adaptation is out of the question.'

Er, um, that too.

But we will leave chastity or social perceptions for another time (probably never); even if it wasn't a hundred Bloomer Nadekos in front of us, this was still quite serious.

Because what was thought to be one remaining shikigami was now a hundred and one — furthermore, 'a hundred Bloomer Nadekos' was just a rough estimate; there could be even more.

This was not a two-against-one.

Even if one includes the supporting Ononoki-chan, this was still three against over a hundred — there was no point in battling, was there.

Seeing that Divine Nadeko has so many Sengoku Nadekos as pawns, she might be ready to rid one or two.

‘“There’s no point in battling” seems a bit much… things are not that pessimistic. Whilst we have a glaring disadvantage in terms of numbers, the amount of people on their side means it is impossible to give detailed instructions to every single one of the hundred shikigami. It doesn’t matter how divinely powerful Divine Nadeko is.’

‘……’

Really?

It was true that by the looks of it (a sight so disgusting that it was actually physically draining to look at), from these hundred Bloomer Nadekos, they didn’t seem to have a will of their own.

They seem to not care at all, or have hollow eyes… they grab books really slowly as well.

I may be low on stamina, tired, and aching everywhere, but I could probably move quicker than those Bloomer Nadekos — let alone Anti-Nadeko with her movement limiter removed.

If a shikigami’s consciousness can be described as an artificial intelligence, then the hundred Bloomer Nadekos are the NPCs.

It may be the case that this was a mass-production model without differentiating details, hence this tendency — but even so, a hundred of them proved an overpowering advantage.

Overnumbered.

Attacks need no explanation, and their defence was also overwhelming — if there was one thing Divine Nadeko fears despite her godlike powers, it was me, holding the method of sealing her in.

Once at hand's reach, one swipe with a sketchbook page will capture them in the blink of an eye, be they a god or a serpent — conversely, this was the one event Divine Nadeko had to prevent.

Hence the gap in numbers — in other words,

Fawning Nadeko's 'human barrier'.

I already guessed this was how Divine Nadeko would use Gentle Nadeko, but I was not expecting her to make a hundred Sengoku Nadekos to build this wall — additionally, unlike Fawning Nadeko's 'human barrier', since they were all Nadekos, Divine Nadeko could blend in.

Not hiding amongst bookshelves, but hiding amongst Nadekos; I have no choice but to surrender, haven't I?

Both my hands up in surrender in front of everybody with their hand bra, the irony.

'Oi, oi, you haven't forgotten, have you, Naddie?'

As I was enveloped in all manners of despair, Ononoki-chan interjected.

'Even if Divine Nadeko is amongst this crowd, I still have my hand on her back — not covering her breast, but gripping on her back. So she can hide however she wants, but we can still know where she is. Most importantly, Divine Nadeko appears to still be oblivious to this fact.'

'……'

I see — quite an advantage, I must say.

A sizeable advantage.

Not as huge as the despair hanging above me, but sizeable nonetheless.

However, even with a rough idea of where Divine Nadeko is, breaking through a hundred Bloomer Nadekos to reach her was still a problem…

'…But since that trap sprung on the ground floor, Divine Nadeko must know we're here, surely?'

'Probably, given that great noise.'

But there was no reaction from the hundred Bloomer Nadekos; looks like Ononoki-chan was right, Divine Nadeko could not give them specific instructions.

Which meant Divine Nadeko was preparing for a siege.

Such preference to this strategy was, as expected, because she was born from me, a hikikomori; should this be a cause for self-reflection… the other side seemed to have no intention of going on the offensive.

Decoys, traps, sneak attacks — snake-like attacks, if one were to be overly cynical.

Although if there were a hundred yourselves in front of you, anybody would end up jaded and world-weary.

Then again, for a manga lover, trapped in a comics market feels like living the dream.

But this is something I wish to achieve for myself.

'They're definitely not steady as a rock either. There's no more decoys or traps available to them, no room to restart — those hundred Sengoku Nadekos are also not the original default, but in this unbearable form; I'm guessing she's trying to deflate your will at the expense of a little damage to herself; therefore, if you attack now, there's nothing more Divine Nadeko could do.'

'……'

Those were only predictions… but for us, we had no room to restart either.

Besides, if that were the case, my will to fight has definitely taken a hit according to her plan, but even so, even though she's made me seen this ludicrous sight, the thought of giving Divine Nadeko a good talking-to had not disappeared — even if Ononoki-chan told us we should leave, I would stay here alone.

This was for Fawning Nadeko, who heroically sacrificed herself to save me and fulfil her duties; for Gentle Nadeko, who woefully sacrificed herself whilst baiting me and failing her duties.

And also for my future.

Present Nadeko is going to fight Divine Nadeko.

'…But there's no way we can just rush in; Ononoki-chan, any ideas?'

'Hmmm. Not that I don't have any…'

With my question, Ononoki-chan gave a stammered response. No, her tone of voice was as unchanging as ever, but seems that she only started thinking of strategies now; I feel Ononoki-chan's not particularly enthusiastic about this fight.

'It's all thanks to Araragi Tsukihi that my misfortunes became visible for all to see, plus I was only recently reassembled, and my right hand is made of dirt… given my situation, it might be better if you devised a strategy.'

'M-me? No, but… I've made a big blunder just now…'

For some reason, not just now, Ononoki-chan has always wanted me to think of ways to deal with the shikigami.

I just realised, the moment she first saw Speedo Nadeko, she did not use the 'Unlimited Rulebook', but had me wait, see, and catch that big fish — that could also be because she wanted me to make the final decision.

People can only save themselves — self-help.

'I will of course give my opinion. In order to maximise efficacy and chances of success, I will fine-tune accordingly as a pro. Any idea can be of use.'

'…Understood. I'll have a think.'

If this was past me, I would have refused on the spot.

Even up until yesterday.

But current me, today's me, that was the response I gave.

'I will try my best. I probably wouldn't beat the Fire Sisters' lieutenant, Tsukihi-chan, though.'

'If you ever get to that girl's level, you'd be better off not doing anything at all.'

Her words to Tsukihi-chan were still mean as ever.

So, let us think like an aspiring manga artist would.

Like that time against Anti-Nadeko, one must eliminate the distinction between reality and fantasy — this was an offensive.

Curiously enough, the stage a comics market.

This called for some unrealistic combat, something straight from a battle manga.

I was already different from when I drew Divine Nadeko, and I have to reflect that.

'…I can use your "Unlimited Rulebook", right, Ononoki-chan?'

'Only once. No matter in what form, no more than once.'

'Would the hundred Bloomer Nadekos still move after disabling Divine Nadeko? Or is it that once the boss falls, all her henchmen can be sealed as well?'

'We'll never know until we try, but it should be the latter. So to take an extreme, if

we kill you, then all Nadekos would disappear.'

'That's a bit too extreme… no need to root it out. Hmmm, then —'

I once again took out the sheet of paper that had Anti-Nadeko on it from my pocket. I also took out an empty sheet of paper, one I prepared in advance for capturing Divine Nadeko and Gentle Nadeko.

'…Anti-Nadeko's hairstyle came from a snip from Tsukihi-chan, and is a hairstyle she hates, right…'

'Mm? Yeah, you mentioned that whilst you were drawing all the Sengoku Nadekos.'

'Then'

Ononoki-chan had a look of 'so what?' written across her face, as I told her an idea that came out of nowhere.

'Then I'll make it even shorter — about as short as *mine*.'

026

‘“Unlimited Rulebook” — I said with a posed look. Crap, I said it.’

I think I heard something that shouldn’t have been said, but couldn’t be unheard; but that aside, Ononoki-chan used her ultimate technique on the upper floor all of a sudden.

Without reservations.

To bring out the ace at the beginning goes against every theory, and was the mark of an outsider, but this was what Ononoki-chan went for out of caution.

Of course, the target was already locked on.

To ignore the hundred Bloomer Nadekos, despite them being such an offensive sight that gets in one’s way no matter how much one did not want to look, is probably a luxury afforded by an oddity divorced from human emotions — besides, whether she wanted to hide or to escape, that right hand on her back enabled Ononoki-chan to lock onto her and use the ‘Unlimited Rulebook’.

Though not her dominant hand, she expanded her left index finger, and shot towards an as-yet unseen, veiled Divine Nadeko like a bazooka.

If this was all that was needed to settle the match, that would be great, but things are never that simple, are they. Even without noticing the right hand on her back, the opponent must have already understood that

the previously severed Ononoki-chan in the Kitashirahebi Shrine was not dead — meaning Divine Nadeko must have prepared some countermeasures against the 'Unlimited Rulebook'.

In other words, the 'Nadeko barrier'.

However, whether there were a hundred or a thousand of them, one 'Unlimited Rulebook' rendered it all moot — they were no stronger than any ordinary person, so this technique will bat all of them away.

Like piercing through a shoji paper door — no, piercing through copy paper?

If Divine Nadeko mass produced a hundred Divine Nadekos (sheets), then it would have been something we could not handle; we would have needed Gaen-san to bail us out.

But this was something beyond Divine Nadeko's abilities, because one Divine Nadeko could not control a hundred Divine Nadekos — therefore, these Nadekos were ultimately a distraction, a decoy of Bloomer Nadekos.

NPCs.

Based on that, the real walls probably weren't the eye-grabbing Bloomer Nadekos, but the myriad heavy bookshelves arranged in this floor, plus the books within.

Therefore, the targets I wanted Ononoki-chan to hit were not the slow Bloomer Nadekos, but the bookshelves.

I will repay this by becoming a legendary manga artist and adding a third storey to this

bookstore, I swore as I planned this offensive — going past all bookshelves alongside Bloomer Nadekos, and reaching straight for Divine Nadeko.

In other words, I wished to use Ononoki-chan's 'Unlimited Rulebook' for some roadworks — the great noise from Divine Nadeko's collapsing bookshelf trap on the first floor had been surpassed by the thundering BGM from my flying bookshelves; amidst the flying flakes of copy paper that originally stored Bloomer Nadeko, I saw it.

A glimpse.

A look.

Divine Nadeko, with a hundred thousand snakes on her head — with a white one-piece dress and baring her feet (yes, Divine Nadeko wears no shoes, that was how she was drawn); despite the untold number of flying bookshelves, comics, and Bloomer Nadekos, despite a direct hit from the 'Unlimited Rulebook' dampening her abilities, she still gave that charming, pure, immaculate smile, as if nothing had happened at all.

A godly smile.

She was both shikigami and kami.

I looked like 'that' not long ago — when she first appeared this morning, she ran away amidst the chaos, so this was the first time I had had a proper look at her.

Divine Nadeko.

Sengoku Nadeko as the serpent god.

So that's it.

…Speaking of things difficult to look at, Divine Nadeko surpasses Bloomer Nadeko — such was her holiness. Or, even without Ononoki's right hand as a marker, with the right thinking, she could probably still be found amidst the hundred Bloomer Nadekos.

Therefore, from her perspective, to make us waste the 'Unlimited Rulebook' was worth hiding in this bookstore and manufacturing a hundred Bloomer Nadekos — she might even think that we have fallen for her trick.

In reality, the injured Ononoki-chan could not handle the recoil from her ultimate technique, and was blown off onto the staircase landing — despite saying what she said, Ononoki-chan really was not in a condition to use the 'Unlimited Rulebook', not even once.

'Hehehe'

She laughed.

'Hehehehe'

And laughed.

'Hehehehehe'

And laughed.

'Heheheheh

even a god has things they were supposed and not supposed to do.

As somebody who was her, as the artist who created her, this was some sense I have to knock into Divine Nadeko — I know I am unqualified, but I reckon I have the obligation.

The obligation to try.

‘Hehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehe hehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehe hehehehehehehehehahahahahahahahahaha hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha — I’m going to kill you now ♪’

God spake forth.

027

Two Sengoku Nadekos stood against this god.

Present Nadeko and Anti-Nadeko.

The shikigami that is Anti-Nadeko.

The shikigami who hated doing work, who swung chisels around, determined to spill my guts; so if she tried to stab me again once released from the seal, it was the most predictable and also the most worrying thing to consider, but her speedy response to assist came to me as, if anything, a disappointing anti-climax.

Instead of saying she agreed with me, the creator and the user, it might be better to say she had a grudge against Divine Nadeko — no, I was the one who held a grudge, she was the one who embodied it.

More than that, Anti-Nadeko's rage could be more than mine — these four shikigami should all be equal; the way Divine Nadeko had treated Gentle Nadeko and Fawning Nadeko seemed to be unremittable in her eyes.

Therefore — more than the assistance, more than the conjuring, Anti-Nadeko joined me in my battle.

'…Mm?'

Divine Nadeko raised her eyebrows.

She probably thinks she's seeing things — yes, the two Sengoku Nadekos facing her were indeed Present Nadeko and Anti-

Nadeko, but both of them looked like Present Nadeko.

Very short hair, with Tsukihi-chan's clothes.

And the unmatching sandals.

In terms of character design, it was a complete overlap, completely indistinguishable — like those hundred Bloomer Nadekos (vastly reduced, it's roughly forty now), like a mirrored reflection.

Obviously, gone were the uniform fringes, the yukata, and the wooden clogs; I asked her to imitate my appearance — inspired by Fawning Nadeko's line, 'give me those clothes you're wearing next time'.

Anti-Nadeko got there first.

I copied it for her.

Two Sengoku Nadekos that nobody can tell apart.

I *redrew* her in that style.

'……????'

Divine Nadeko gave a puzzled look.

The exact reaction dogs or cats give when they look in the mirror — no, wouldn't a snake looking in the mirror be more appropriate?

This was my own business, so I cannot say for sure, but during the time I became Divine Nadeko, my cognition, my judgement, already lacklustre, were lowered to an extreme.

Like a child.

This was probably the cost of receiving the godly power I nowhere near deserved — therefore, for her to suffer this cognitive dissonance in front of these two Sengoku Nadekos was an expected outcome.

Thinking back, Divine Nadeko using traps, mass-producing Bloomer Nadekos, and treating her co-belligerents as disposable, such acts were less evil or cunning, and more like something primitive, childish — but by no means did this exonerate her.

Anyway, whilst this was a surprise, we would be dumb if we didn't do anything with the other side dumbfounded — without knowing which was Anti-Nadeko, the pair of Present Nadekos sprinted forwards in sync.

Charging towards Divine Nadeko at full speed.

Though both have the same design, the delimited Anti-Nadeko could probably match Kanbaru-san in a sprint, but if she ran at that pace, then the slower Present Nadeko would be found out, so I asked her to adjust her speed.

This did, after all, depend on symmetrical movement.

Making her a dead ringer of Present Nadeko.

So, the two Sengoku Nadekos held in their hand the paper used to seal Divine Nadeko — of course, the one who would actually seal her remained me, her creator. Even if Anti-Nadeko clamped Divine Nadeko with her

sheet of paper, it would do nothing and mean nothing.

However, to be sealed is Divine Nadeko's fatal weak spot, so she had to react to this stunt.

And deal with the two Sengoku Nadekos gunning towards her.

Which one was real deal? Which one had the tools? She was about to face the ultimate true-or-false…

'???……'

With high command (Divine Nadeko) in shambles, the surviving Bloomer Nadekos were also virtually static — even if not, as mass-produced models, their slow processing and lack of specific instructions meant that the sight of the Present Nadeko duo charging down the path opened by the 'unlimited rulebook' would not make them think to block.

'…Whatever, how annoying. Kill them all.'

Divine Nadeko remained nonchalant, lightly saying what seemed in her eyes the most brilliant solution.

As if getting tired of thinking and giving up, as if getting annoyed by the chaos and switching up, by the time she finished her sentence, she held two giant fangs in each of her arms.

Those venomous fangs.

The fangs that split Ononoki-chan into chunks — their sharpness, their foreboding, their toxicity; a chisel stood no chance.

Divine Nadeko, without hesitation, without agitation, without hostility, even, like a child stomping on ants, or a middle school girl carving up snakes, said,

'A one, and a two.'

And swung out both fangs, left and right.

Blithely driving them out.

As if expressing 'as long as I'm cute, what can't I get away with?', those mindlessly thrown fangs pierced the two Sengoku Nadekos with ease.

Unlike Anti-Nadeko aiming at my stomach, Divine Nadeko wanted to nip this in the bud; the two spears that were flung out struck them in the face, where no sheet of paper can hide on.

The one on her left, Anti-Nadeko dressed as Present Nadeko, exploded into confetti.

The one on her right, Present Nadeko as herself, *also exploded into confetti*.

'Eh!? Ehhhhhhhh!?'

'Yup. It's a bluff. Plain and simple.'

Said *I*.

Whilst Divine Nadeko focused on the front, I finally reached her back, nesting her into my sheet of paper.

Victory.

With that, Divine Nadeko exited the third dimension, leaving only Ononoki-chan's right hand — at the same time, about forty surviving Bloomer Nadekos also turned into plain, floating flakes of paper.

Where traces remain of stalwart warriors past, where a hundred Bloomer Nadekos

once stood, remained only one Sengoku Nadeko, dressed identically to everybody else — meaning I was the only one standing where I was.

Ugh, hearing about it was already a pain, yet one year later, there I was, exposing my all in this wretched, unwatchable sight.

Geez, no gods nor buddhas in this world.

028

And now, the reveal.

I'm sure everybody here already has a rough idea, but I have to leave at least some explanation, so here goes.

In summary, with Divine Nadeko placing a hundred Bloomer Nadekos as a shikigami 'Nadeko barrier' across the entire floor, then I could blend in too, at least that was my idea — no, this really was the entire idea at its infancy; all the other bits were appended on.

Blending in the 'human barrier' that is Fawning Nadeko's classmates, whilst not impossible, would have been difficult with my lack of sociability, but against a 'Nadeko barrier', blending in that group should pose little difficulty, as Sengoku Nadeko.

As long as I looked and dressed the same as all the others, then I can approach Divine Nadeko without her noticing; be it from the rear or from the sides, I could collect her into my sheet of paper practically without warning.

The gym shorts and gym shoes I materialised after drawing them — inscribing the essence of gym shorts was no easy task, and I referenced Kanbaru-san, putting detail even in the threads.

Obviously, the same attention to detail also went to the gym shoes.

‘It’s on the level of the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade’s powers of materialisation.’

Ononoki-chan commented; anyway, since one could seal non-shikigami materials such as chisels, I figured, quite simply, that it could work in reverse — in a worst-case scenario, I would have had to catch a Bloomer Nadeko and snatch her clothes, but fortunately this did not need to happen.

Already basically naked, then to be robbed of what little remained, that would be overly atrocious.

The hundred Bloomer Nadekos were based on Gentle Nadeko, so they all had long fringes, but I figured that I could blend in even with my very short hair — when dressed like this, the hairstyle becomes quite irrelevant, as I learnt during my conversation with Sodachi-onee-chan.

In the end, I ended up going around the entire floor, squatting down when I needed to, crawling my way forwards like a snake, feeling quite stealthy.

But of course, even without Ononoki-chan’s comments, I knew that was not enough — sneaking into the crowd of Bloomer Nadekos was not a bad idea in itself, but in order for it to become a valid strategy, there should be a dummy battle going on too.

From Divine Nadeko’s preparations for a siege, I knew that she was trying to prevent me from getting anywhere near her — I did not get to use it fully whilst I was a god, but

snakes have pit organs, which allows thermography, so if I were to hide my tracks, I must have someone distract Divine Nadeko whilst I went about my business.

In this occasion, Anti-Nadeko will serve that purpose — but even with redrawn clothes and hairstyle to imitate me, for her to charge into the upper floor for no reason at all would appear too suspicious.

Therefore — after changing Anti-Nadeko's design, activating her, then drawing the gym shorts and gym shoes and materialising them, I *designed another* Present Nadeko and brought her into three dimensions.

Yes.

Using two shikigami at once.

Something that should never, ever, ever be done or be allowed to do, as Ononoki-chan said — more than that, she also reminded me to make the shikigami different from the creator, since there were cases of the shikigami replacing their masters.

These bits of advice did not elude me.

But with Divine Nadeko conjuring a hundred Bloomer Nadekos, so came my thought that maybe *this method* will work — meaning, even though I can only summon one shikigami in the form of Anti-Nadeko, I can let *Anti-Nadeko summon one* shikigami of her own.

A *shikigami's shikigami*.

If my own anger and the righteous anger against Divine Nadeko could awaken some latent power within me, then that would have been fantastic, but such an emotional progression did not come, so I tried rationalising it like my life depended on it.

In terms of drawing ability, Anti-Nadeko was, in the end, me, so she could definitely draw shikigami — though it would be too much to ask her to control a hundred shikigami like Divine Nadeko, one Present Nadeko was something she could control.

That said, things did not go that smoothly; the Present Nadeko Anti-Nadeko drew was similar to the mass-produced Bloomer Nadekos, in that she could only receive simple commands, a shikigami like an NPC.

A fuzzy version of myself.

Perhaps this was not a question of how many, but the very nature of shikigami created by shikigami. Even Ononoki-chan did not know the answer to that, so there is room here for future research — as a shikigami herself, Ononoki-chan must have her own thoughts on the matter.

Moving on, let us try a simple command.

For instance, how about 'run'?

So — I let them run.

Anti-Nadeko dressed as Present Nadeko, and her shikigami, Present Nadeko (shikigami edition), running in parallel towards Divine Nadeko.

This required a straight course, which I let Ononoki-chan handle with her 'Unlimited

Rulebook' — this goes without saying, but shattering Divine Nadeko with the 'Unlimited Rulebook' itself would have been the most ideal outcome.

Turns out wracking my brains until it nearly exploded was not a waste, because with two, three safety measures, this idea seemed to have a high likelihood of success, and honestly, I have not bragged like this in a long time; but as one can see, not everything went according to plan.

This was completely unacceptable.

To say this was a success is really pushing it — no, I do not mean having dress up like that to seal Divine Nadeko. Not that I dressed in much to begin with.

My plan would have me grabbing Divine Nadeko before Anti-Nadeko and Present Nadeko (shikigami edition) got defeated — her pulling out those fang spears was beyond my expectations.

After Fawning Nadeko, I had once again sacrificed my shikigami.

Two of them, no less.

When I was making my plans, I already had their sacrifices in mind; in the end, I am no different from Divine Nadeko.

Two bluffs, and at the same time, two lures — in the end, that me was the result of this me.

'You do have obvious differences from Divine Nadeko, I think… if you think all of you are Sengoku Nadeko, then rather than saying

that you're wrong, I should say that's a strange conclusion to reach.'

At the landing, Ononoki-chan commented after hearing my lengthy assessment, sitting with both her legs stretched straight.

This could be a form of consolation — but not only did the right hand of dirt fall off, every part of her body seemed to be misaligned after that impact on the landing, so she needed to be repaired all over again; I was not quite sure if Ononoki-chan could find the energy in her to console me.

I took back the right hand that was on Divine Nadeko's back, and pressed it on Ononoki-chan's wounds to make it heal.

It does feel like I am already familiar with healing doll oddities, but this was something I wish I would never get to experience ever again — seeing Ononoki-chan in this state made it plain for all to see how fragile, how flawed my plan was.

'You took the biggest risk. That's for sure. Between me, Anti-Nadeko, and Present Nadeko (shikigami edition), you shouldered the most dangerous job of all with mere flesh and bone… that alone deserves plenty of praise.'

You've changed a lot from Divine Nadeko only staying in her comfort zone.

You're no longer who you used to be.

Ononoki-chan said. Said to me.

No longer like back then.

I had never heard words that made me happier — but at the same time, hearing those words also made me sad.

'I'm not asking you to accept it. An easy-going character like myself would be taken quite aback if you just accepted it like it is. Well, if you really want to memorialise them, then why don't you preserve these experiences and these feelings in the form of a drawing?'

'Drawing…'

To preserve, huh.

Becoming a drawing, a work, a memento, to preserve.

Too true. This was the way.

What I could only do — what I could repay.

To have something I can do, I'm overjoyed.

'Drawing characters so cute that you wouldn't want to put them in harm's way; there's no manga artist who's like that — letting them roam free may be alright, but sometimes they need a fitting test of character, or a fitting end. That aside, Naddie —'

Just as what could barely be called first aid was done, the freshly repaired Ononoki-chan opened and closed her long-awaited right hand, and looked towards the bookstore's upper and ground floor, respectively.

'The "deflective barrier born from fear of human contact" is well and truly gone now — you'd best leave this place fast.'

'Oh… then let's go together, Ononoki-chan.'

‘No, I have to clean this up. I am a pro. With this much mess and carnage, I cannot just walk away — aah, there’s no need for you to help. Now that the dust has settled with Divine Nadeko, contacting Gaen-san or onee-chan wouldn’t be a problem — the real work that comes after this is something left for the pros. Frankly, you serve no more purpose here.’

She sounded like shooing me away, but it was clear that Ononoki-chan was shouldering all responsibility as a pro.

Taking all my responsibilities — like a shikigami.

Like a true friend.

For this kid to look after me, I felt glad to be able to reunite with Tsukihi-chan — no, it may sound like an emotional tale, but for Tsukihi-chan, whose clothes were borrowed without her lending them, it would sound cruel.

It always feels that, with all this, my fate shares a lot of parallels with Chinou Nomi-san from a certain world, but with Tsukihi-chan willing to restart her relationship and care about me, she has my deepest respect.

That was no lie.

‘So therefore — *go to a place where you’re needed*, Naddie.’

Sengoku Nadeko.

You’ve got somewhere you need to be, don’t you?

Ononoki-chan said after a pause.
‘Mm. Yeah.’
I nodded in response.
Yes. This was not the end.

029

After changing into Tsukihi-chan's clothes, the moment I stepped out of the bookstore, a Volkswagen pulled up in front of me — don't tell me the 'deflective barrier born from fear of human contact' from a hundred beings was already null and void so soon?

That was what I thought, but I was proved wrong. The one who stepped out from the driver's seat was Ougi-san in a male school uniform.

'Hey, Sengoku-chan. Need a lift?'

'……'

A second year high-schooler driving a car in a school uniform!

Was this guy for real?

I shouldn't say this as someone who has violated the law today, big and small, but why is this guy doing this!?

''Cos you borrowed my bike. Didn't I say I'd get around somehow? Well, this car I also had to borrow.'

'You make it sound like it's my fault…'

No, it was my fault though.

Thinking back, I did cause Ougi-san a spot of bother.

…A spot of bother?

Hasn't this guy been getting himself involved this whole time?

Then to be shy or to brush off this guy would be meaningless.

‘…Whatever. In this hour… Please let me in. I’m in a hurry to get somewhere.’

‘Ha-ha. That’s the spirit. Or maybe you could take the wheel, Sengoku-chan? I’ve borrowed it anyway, so a few bumps or dents is no big deal.’

A mighty way of thinking about things.

But as someone who borrowed Ougi-san’s BMX, rode it to someone else’s place, and had completely forgotten about it, I am in no position to comment like that.

I did reject his offer though, and sat on the passenger seat.

‘Uhh, I need to be…’

‘No worries, I know. After separating with you, Sengoku-chan, I’ve been everywhere searching for a middle school girl wearing only gym shorts; I’m not doing this just for show.’

Even if you did, I don’t want to see you doing it at all.

After hearing Kanbaru-san’s testimonies this morning, we went our separate ways, but from what happened after, I cannot imagine Ougi-san finding any Bloomer Nadekos at all…

Where did this guy actually go?

‘Ougi-san… Ougi-san, what do you know?’

‘I don’t know anything — you’re the one who knows, Sengoku-chan.’

Ougi-san said, as he jammed the accelerator on the Volkswagen.

I’m the one who knows.

He’s right — I knew it from the beginning.

But I was mistaken.

Convinced until now, mistaken until now.

I knew it full well, yet I decided to fake not knowing it — but in the end, this was no different from what I did last year.

Ononoki-chan said I was 'no longer who I used to be', so I must not leave this mistake, this conviction, this misunderstanding untendered.

'Oshino Meme-san… he once said I was a "victim".'

'Mm? Who is this Oshino Meme-san?'

'…Your uncle, Ougi-san.'

'Ah, right, nearly forgot about that. And?'

'Mm. In fact, I think he's right. But me back then was also content with being the "victim".'

To be liked. To be hated. To be scorned. To be cursed.

All in the passive, nothing active from me — I see, I really was a "victim".

Wrapping myself in harm — but not in responsibility.

'But could I definitively say I didn't want to be liked? Could I definitively say I did nothing hateful? Could I definitively say I did nothing that heaped only scorn? Could I definitively say I did nothing cursed?'

'Ha-ha. I've no idea what you're saying. What is this? Are you suggesting that for others, everything's because of you? That the one bullied has their share of the blame too?'

'No, that's not what I meant…'

I did not say that.

If I had to evaluate it, I deserved no praise at all, but I think what they did was outside the realm of human decency — it remains unforgivable to this day.

But it was true, I did nothing to stop those who liked me, or were friends with me, from committing such inhumane acts.

A word or two could have stopped it, but the thought of failure hurting me even more, and my self-protection, made me silent.

In the end, I am nothing but spoiled.

The one who loves me the most, the one who spoils me the most, is myself — playing the victim all the time, letting everybody around me be the perpetrators.

'Interesting. Quite philosophical as well. But what's that got to do with today? It's all in the past, innit?'

Ougi-san asked, cheerily rotating the steering wheel — if we get stopped, I am bolting my way out of here.

'It's all now.'

I answered.

'Of the four shikigami, this "victim" Sengoku Nadeko, that is, Gentle Nadeko, I look down on her a bit. Or putting it oppositely, I'm overprotecting her — compared to the active Fawning Nadeko, the emotional Anti-Nadeko, the mysterious Divine Nadeko, I think Gentle Nadeko's the normalest of all Sengoku Nadekos.'

Therefore I was dead sure that she was freely used by the other three Sengoku Nadekos.

Forced to change her clothes by Fawning Nadeko.

Forced to give her chisels away by Anti-Nadeko.

Forced to become bait by Divine Nadeko.

The reason for this conviction was I had been viewing her as a "victim" — if I may, I even think that she became game for all three; I pitied her.

Pity — she desires to be loved.

However.

On the upper floor of the bookstore, before the showdown with Divine Nadeko, as I conjured the one so pivotal to my plans, Anti-Nadeko, she said, in her usual pugnacity,

'Yeah, yeah, I'll help you. Un-fucking-forgivable, Gentle Nadeko lent me those chisels and Divine Nadeko decides to fucking parade her around town like that? I'll fuck her up — huhhh?'

…It was an anger that I shared.

But something in that line felt odd.

She *lent her* those chisels?

By Anti-Nadeko's personality, I had always thought she had forcefully grabbed weak little Gentle Nadeko's chisels — but it sounded like she owed her one; wasn't this like when I borrowed Ougi-san's BMX, built on mutual consent?

That means — could it be, that *the chisel was not the only thing lent*?

That to hide in that room was also a borrowed idea? — when Fawning Nadeko propped up the fallen bookshelf just now, I asked her, 'why save me', to which she replied:

'Who knows. Prolly 'cos I'm not content?'

At that time, I thought she was unhappy at me — but if that was not the case, if she was unhappy at the bait, Speedo Nadeko, Gentle Nadeko, then what does that mean?

What does that mean?

Or, riddle me this, if Gentle Nadeko was the one who wanted to change clothes with Fawning Nadeko, what does that mean? — today was a weekday.

A girl in a school uniform would have drawn attention roaming on the streets alone — in actuality, the first one who was found was Fawning Nadeko in uniform, sending herself into the dead end that is the middle school.

The first to get caught, making Fawning Nadeko realise she was the bait, making her want to resist, making her want to help me — then what about Divine Nadeko?

To have used Gentle Nadeko as a decoy made it feel like she was the one pulling the strings, but could that childish deity ever be that sly?

Her intellect has lowered significantly. Perhaps she can think even less than when I was a deity.

Her speech was fragmented too.

I had no idea what she was trying to pull.

Could it be because that god did not have anything she wanted to do, and only did all of this out of somebody else's instructions, somebody else's coercion?

By whom?

By the someone she had been led to believe was bait.

'Of the four shikigami, Gentle Nadeko's the weakest… but because of that, she gives no pause in manipulating the stronger ones.'

Just as I handed my life to somebody else — Gentle Nadeko handed off combat and even escape to the other three.

It comes as second nature for someone spoiled, to heed no attention when relying on others… there is no malice or ulterior motive, so everybody spoils her on their own.

On the other hand, this makes her slow to realise hate or curses, unable to understand why she is despised, and also the reason why she can never escape from a 'victim mindset', blaming every friction, every discord onto everybody else's head, never a moment of self-reflection.

The urge to continue being the victim.

'So you're saying Gentle Nadeko's the mastermind? She's the last boss, huh? Ha-ha, a surprising culprit indeed.'

Ougi-san piped, giving a light chuckle.

But that was not a chuckle that says 'how could that ever possibly happen', that was a chuckle that said 'you didn't know this until now?'

‘But supposing this is all true, wasn’t Gentle Nadeko flattened by the bookshelf? Speculate all you want, but the thing of interest isn’t there anymore; the truth is left in the dark —

‘No, this time, it’s in the fold’ — Ougi-san concluded.

He really crumpled it into a paper ball, didn’t he?

But that was not so.

‘That Speedo Nadeko crushed by the bookshelf might not be the real Gentle Nadeko. Because I only saw that kid’s back — no, I couldn’t tell even from the front. If that Speedo Nadeko’s mass-produced by Divine Nadeko too, then…’

‘Then?’

Ougi-san repeated jovially.

Seeming like he’s bursting with joy in this realisation.

‘If this shot in the dark is right on the bullseye, if Gentle Nadeko not only has a “deflective barrier born from fear of human contact”, but also the ability to “be the victim out of self-consciousness”, so what? Sengoku-chan, you just said you “had no idea what Divine Nadeko was trying to pull”, but why would Gentle Nadeko puppet Divine Nadeko? If Gentle Nadeko trying to play every Sengoku Nadeko, including you, like a fiddle —’

Like a magical fiddle.

‘Then what was that for? Was she really trying to replace you?’

‘From what we ended up with, the only one who wanted to take my place was Divine Nadeko — even this was guided by Gentle Nadeko… what Gentle Nadeko wanted to do was to buy time.’

‘Buy time?’

‘Yes. *Buying time to do the thing she really wanted to do* — whilst Fawning Nadeko grabbed everyone’s attention, whilst Divine Nadeko was setting up her castle, that kid, that kid is doing something she wants, something only she wants.’

Whether the other shikigami succeeded in doing what they want, whether I get replaced, these did not matter at all to Gentle Nadeko — the town gripped with panic did not matter.

She only focused on what she wanted.

…In some sense, this Sengoku Nadeko is more like Sengoku Nadeko than the other Sengoku Nadekos.

‘But, Ougi-san, you knew all along, no? About what Gentle Nadeko wanted — and still wants now. You said you know where I’m going.’

‘Indeed I do. But do excuse me for saying this, I don’t think it’s that noble an act.’

He said without a care, but it was something I agreed on.

‘Yes. This is not noble at all. Therefore I have to put a stop to it. Otherwise this tale would never end.’

‘Ha-ha. Isn’t that good, though? I know a lot of my seniors who ended their tales like

this — Kanbaru-senpai's in the middle of it too; right, here we are.'

Ougi-san applied the brakes and parked on the kerb — ooh, he's a smoother driver than I thought; it did not feel like he was blazing across town, but we were here a lot earlier than I thought we would.

Was it a shortcut?

Puzzled, I rolled down the window, and had a peek outside — on the other side of the pedestrian path was an old set of wooden apartments; they must be over fifty years old now.

On the entrance were the words 'Tamikura Apartments'

…'Tamikura Apartments'?

Erm, the 'Tamikura Apartments', let me see…

'Speaking of what you wanted to do last year but didn't, that's killing your love rival, Senjougahara-senpai, right? Quick, make your way over there and grab Gentle Nadeko before she sets it on fire!'

'……'

I gave him a grin.

With all my might, I gave him a grin.

'That's totally not it, huhhh!? Wrong place, shit-for-brains! Where the fuck is this? Lighting apartments on fire? Who the fuck does that? Who do you think *I* am, you cunt!? What's with you making a cool fucking entrance when you're dumber than a fucking brick!? Get out of the fucking car, I'm gonna fucking run you over till you're part of the

fucking tarmac! And if you don't fucking want
that, get me to Naoetsu High School stat!
Front gates, right fucking now!'

030

Naoetsu High School, front gates.

Here, where classes were almost over, stood a fourteen-year-old girl all alone — her cap lowered, staring downwards, wearing overalls.

A bum bag on her hip.

A pair of climbing shoes, ones suited for a hike.

The girl seemed to be anticipating someone; glancing inside one moment, glancing at the giant clock on the campus wall the next, shifting impatiently. Whilst impatient, she seemed happy being like that — the wait, the thought of meeting that someone here, seems to make her happy.

…What a fool.

No need for Ougi-san to say it; what a fool.

I approached her.

'It's no use, Gentle Nadeko.'

Said I.

She seemed dazed, dreamy; unaware of my presence until I spoke to her; she — Gentle Nadeko responded with a high-pitched gasp.

She turned over, panicked.

'Aa, aah, aaah —'

Unable to hide her pounding heart.

Even without looking, I knew; behind her long fringes, her eyes were unsteady — I really cannot imagine her as the malevolent Sengoku Nadeko, the one who took the three

Sengoku Nadekos, no, four Sengoku Nadekos, including me, for a ride.

Although it did not seem like it, the fact that she was here, doing this, was proof of my sudden hypothesis.

Whilst also proving how foolish Gentle Nadeko was — how foolish I was.

But I genuinely could have arrived here earlier — I could have found her earlier. When Bloomer Nadeko and Speedo Nadeko appeared, or when thinking about that time I sped away from Hanekawa-san, I must have been able to notice.

Because I remember tightly hugging those exact clothes, waiting in this exact spot — for Sengoku Nadeko, this was one unmissable *Sehenswürdigkeit*.

'It's no use.'

I repeated.

'That person's no longer here.'

I told her.

Cornered her.

'……?'

Gentle Nadeko tilted her head, signalling incomprehension.

No, not incomprehension, but an unwillingness to comprehend.

Fawning Nadeko knew she was one year up, but Gentle Nadeko was still living in last June.

Growth, change, improvement, she rejected them all.

Refused to act on her own.

Refused to start, refused to end.

Refused to move, refused to push.

Only waited. That was the only thing she did.

Even so, I still pleaded with her — I should not be the one doing it, but I was the only one who can do it.

'Nobody can stay in year two forever; nobody can stay fourteen forever — there's no use waiting here. You shouldn't be doing this.'

Shouldn't be doing this.

I once did something I shouldn't.

Even with my words, I had no idea how much of it went in her mind; Gentle Nadeko gave zero reaction.

Maybe she was treating it as a 'bad encounter', focusing on me through her fringes, subconsciously shutting me off — she could do that.

This was what this girl, Sengoku Nadeko was like.

A useless only daughter — a useless girl.

'You really, really shouldn't do this. You can wait for as long as you like, but nobody'll be happy in the end. You can think for as much as you like, but everybody'll end up harmed. That's still the best case. It wouldn't be strange at all if things got messier. So please, you cannot stay here — I cannot stay here. You knew this from the beginning, didn't you? Because I know full well.'

'…Sorry.'

Out of nowhere, Gentle Nadeko gave an apology.

'It's Nadeko's fault. Sorry.'

'……'

Did she think I was scolding her?

No, that wasn't it.

Her apology served to end the conversation.

To make it her own fault, to make herself the victim, to end such troubles; that was it — how frustrating.

To make herself unblemished, unharmed, oblivious —

How many things had she ignored? — lectures, help, advice, all in one ear and out the other; that was how far she had gone.

Therefore — I should be the one apologising.

Distanced like this.

It would have been effortless to clip her with that blank sketchbook page, without a single word — since Gentle Nadeko was waiting for somebody, the 'deflective barrier born from fear of human contact' cannot be used, and with me being able to become a perpetrator any time I want, there was no point in her 'being the victim out of self-consciousness'.

Defeating her would be easy.

But I cannot do it. I am not doing it.

I will not perpetrate, nor will I guard.

I know she was resisting me, I understand she was ignoring me, but I remained patient, I remained steadfast, I continued to face Gentle Nadeko.

‘Hey, listen to me. Nobody can stay in the same place their whole life. Not a year two middle schooler, not a year three high schooler, not deities, nor vampires. If they did that, nobody would exist. You can wait forever, and Prince Charming still wouldn’t welcome you; that glass slipper wouldn’t turn up; even if you pretend to sleep, nobody’d kiss you awake. So please, stop waiting like this everywhere, and come back with everybody — everybody’s waiting for you.’

Fawning Nadeko, Anti-Nadeko, Divine Nadeko.

All waiting for you to take your steps.

‘…So —’

Gentle Nadeko still gave no response; but she started trembling, and whispered a question.

Obviously, I could not see it with her fringes.

But she was sobbing; I knew it from her voice.

Perhaps afraid of me — perhaps afraid of the future.

She teared up as her emotions dictated.

Without any intention of hiding it.

‘So, there’s, no love after all?’

She tearfully inquired.

Such a simplistic question caught me aback.

‘There was already love. There was already joy in waiting. There was already happiness in thinking. There wasn’t anything more that was wished for. But, is that love

over? Have those thoughts gone? Had enough? Forgotten? No longer important? No longer there? Is the future this dull? Is this the kind of adult Nadeko will become?'

'……'

I could say that she is juvenile, that the only thing she fell in love with was being in love. I could lecture her, that she only worships people around her because of her timidity and inexperience. I could illustrate that this was no different from her saying she will marry her father when she grew up, that reunions are not fated, that this was normal when they live next to each other.

If it was Tsukihi-chan, that was what she would have done.

That was what she said to me.

I could fib and say that love is not everything, that she may wish for nothing more, but there was more to life other than romance. I could lie and say that life is not lived for one's own happiness. I could deceive her and say that something good will happen as long as she lives on.

If it was Kaiki-san, that was what he would have done.

That was what he said to me.

'…Gentle Nadeko, I —'

However.

I did neither of those things.

Because in the end, those words were not mine to say.

Going back to what I can do, I could be as emotional as Anti-Nadeko, as mystical as

Divine Nadeko, as reassuring as Fawning Nadeko.

'I promise.'

I gave Gentle Nadeko a tight hug.

Face-against-face, closely; I let her tears wet me as I cuddled her.

I could not cry like that today even if I tried; precisely because of that, Gentle Nadeko can act as my changed self. She can cry for me.

Let this be — a heartfelt wish.

'I promise you that I will fall in love again. I will never stop loving. I will never forget the feeling of happiness I get from waiting, from thinking about them. I will never let your lost love be in vain. I will pursue my dreams, I will not learn, and I will keep falling in love. I will remind myself that I don't want anything else. The one I love will be kinder, cooler, more talented, more humorous, more generous, more prone to love, and not a lolicon. I will never shirk from hard work or escape from crowds; I will become the person you want me to be, I will never disappoint you. So please, don't wait here anymore — come with me, towards the future.'

Because I will stand by you for eternity.

Your hardships, your suffering, your adorable tales of lost love, I will immortalise them in a manga.

I will turn you into a heart-throbbing tale.

After finishing that sentence, just as Sodachi-onee-chan did in the park, I softly pat Gentle Nadeko's head — only until then did I realise, compared to last year, I had grown taller.

Sengoku Nadeko, fifteen years of age.

Developing, growing, wandering.

Immature, always the nearly man.

Whilst far from being a full-grown adult, this was a day I felt a little like an elder sister.

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An epilogue, and also a prologue, if you will.

A future memory, a story after.

I finally saw Shinobu-chan~

This was not a rendezvous worth shouting to the world about, but it took much less time than I thought for Tsukihi-chan to notice my sweatshirt in her walk-in wardrobe. The following time she came over to play and return the sweatshirt, I saw Shinobu.

Once she entered my room, she leisurely took off her jacket.

'I don't know what happened, but I've already got you covered about the front door and the phone receiver~'

She said and flopped on the bed.

You wouldn't relax this soon even in your own room… was what I wanted to say about her bullishness, but indeed, since Karen-chan's graduation, Tsukihi-chan has not only become a representative of this area's middle school girls, but with her caring personality, a leader, even.

I couldn't thank her enough.

'"It's probably my dear friend Nadeko-chan entering the house and wreaking havoc, but she probably didn't do it out of malice, so please forgive her, I'll give her a good lesson", that's what I said~'

I don't think I'm covered at all.

This kid might be good at taking care of people, but back in the day, she was nothing but relentless.

'So I've come here to give you one. I have descended here. Oh, you can have those clothes on the hanger. Please, go ahead~ A commemoration of hikikomori Nadeko's first outing. We'll call it NadekoStyle~'

'NadekoStyle…'

'Let's buy you some fitting shoes next time. I came here to give you *une chaussure*.'

'You mean *une leçon*, right?'

'Zzz…zzz…'

And she's asleep. She really does whatever she wants, doesn't she?

In face of my close friend's antics, I gave a stilted smile.

'I say, cease thy grimace.'

Right then, in Tsukihi-chan's flat shadow, a human right hand appeared — no, it was not that of a human's.

Nor a zombie's right hand.

A vampire's right hand.

More correctly, a former vampire's right hand.

The girl with the golden hair and golden eyes — as if crawling from Tsukihi-chan's shadow, the former Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, Oshino Shinobu, made her entrance.

'Oh no! Me grimacing my close friend has been witnessed!'

— Not.

Why would Shinobu-chan appear from Tsukihi-chan's shadow?

Once feared as the King of Aberrations, Shinobu-chan was confined within a shadow since last June, but she shouldn't be in Tsukihi-chan's shadow, no?

'Kaka. This person is after all my master's fine sister — vampires art blood aberrations, meaning they can shuttle hither and thither twixt blood relatives' shadows. However, such forceful attachment drains the shadow's owner — so refrain from thy grimace.'

I see.

So that was why Tsukihi-chan slept as soon as she entered the room — no, for me, this was not because she was tired, but because this was fully in Tsukihi-chan's character.

But, that aside.

Why would Shinobu-chan force her way into my room like this?

The scene was visibly palpable.

The same thought flashed across my head back when I was about to be crushed by the bookshelf; probably the same thought one has in moments of death… my heartrate increased tenfold.

An encounter such as this is already draining my lifespan.

But, against my drips of cold sweat, Shinobu-chan merely threw a sadistic glance.

'Here, a souvenir for thee, Lady Forelocks. Nay, that'd be the former Lady Forelocks, no?'

Shinobu-chan revealed her fangs, and took out a paper bag filled with doughnuts.

'S-Souvenir? Doughnuts?'

'Mm. I wish to dine with thee. However, there are merely five to share — I had heard of thy powers of illustration and realisation. Might thou these doughnuts illustrate and perchance multiply their numbers?'

I thought with five, it would already be plenty for two — come to think of it, why is Shinobu-chan trying to have doughnuts with me all of a sudden? The spontaneity was bewildering, but resistance seems an unwise option here.

I quietly sketched the doughnuts from the paper bag.

Back when I was battling Divine Nadeko in the bookstore, I got to know the ins and outs of materialisation with those gym shorts — if it is only materialisation, I can do it on my own. But I must say, doughnuts are harder to draw due to their shape. Their softness is also more difficult to come across in a drawing.

'It's like that; like the "Multiplication Liquid".'

I tried lightening the mood by bringing this up with Shinobu-chan, self-proclaimed devout fan of Fujio Fujiko.

'If thou art comparing, the "Duplicating Mirror" mayhaps prove more apt.'

She corrected.

I really am bad at flattering people, aren't I?

‘Speaking of “The Five Doraemons”, if one can bring oneself two hours into the future, could one not then bring Doraemons four hours, six hours, and eight hours into the future?’

The fanatic started her rant.

I cannot take it much longer.

‘Whilst I do not dispute that *Doraemon* representeth the peak of manga, for a children’s manga, to require it be excessively infused with lessons or be bestowed a masterpiece does not sit well with me —’

I cannot listen to this. Shut up.

Whilst not due to my distraction, the doughnuts did successfully materialise from paper, but the taste was an abject failure.

I gave half the materialised doughnuts to Shinobu-chan; they ended up tasting like clay — not clay, but paper clay.

I feel sick now.

I should imagine Shinobu-chan enraged, alert.

‘Hmph. So foodstuffs are a no, then. My powers of creation are the same; organic material is beyond the likes of me. Then shall we experiment further with machinery? Take something whose insides are unknown — a television, for instance — draw it, and see if we can get a picture on it.’

But she seems unfazed… experiment?

Yes, in fact, what followed next was experimentation — what can be materialised, will they retain their functions, what errors there may be in reproduction. Something

tangible would be great, but imagery from legend will also do; what would happen if one drew a magazine with only the cover, or if one drew a time machine, or a live animal, or a lifeless sample; a small elephant, a gigantic ant, a handsome boy…

So on and so forth.

Instead of saying this was a micro analysis, this was more a macro experiment on everything, where hairs were practically split — I did not understand the meaning behind this; I thought she was toying with my drawing halfway through, I then even doubted if she was trying to test the limits of my drawings for a future duel, but in the end, I finally realised: Shinobu-chan pretended to experiment with me, her former sworn rival, but what she was trying to do was lecture me on how to harness this talent that no normal person has.

Shinobu-chan taught me like she did not care at all, but I knew she was passionate, from the amount of details she went into — doubtlessly she is formulating something of her own too.

To avoid becoming addicted to this power and going berserk, I am looking towards the future and making my own plans too, with taming this power as my first priority — but having had such an acrimonious past, or to put it more bluntly, having nearly duelled to the death, yet displaying such confidence and arrogance, does make her feel like a vampire who has lived six hundred years.

Her generosity is on a scale fifteen-year-old me cannot begin to imagine — be it duels to the death, to assist, or to forgive, she has probably experienced all of them countless times.

I thought I had deeply hurt Shinobu-chan, but for her, this was probably not even a scratch — there would only be one person in this world who can even do such a thing.

'Alas, there is not much I can offer regarding the use of shikigami, for I have created kin twice, and twice they returned a failure.'

Ultimately, she ate all five doughnuts she had brought over; just as she was about to return to Tsukihi-chan's (still sleeping soundly) shadow,

'U-uh, Shinobu-chan!'

I stopped her.

Not because I had to; more than that, I felt there was no need to go through old scars, and I did not know if she would give a proper answer in the first place.

Even so, I felt compelled to ask.

To ask Shinobu-chan, the one who gave me that comment last year.

'Hm? What is it, pray tell?'

'Do I still, as you said, just happen to be cute?'

I asked with my all, bracing myself for imminent death.

'…What…'

She tilted.

‘What, who said such a thing? Turns out there are people who say things off-the-cuff as so.’

‘……’

Was she pretending to be dumb?

Or had she really forgotten?

Is this what is known as ‘even if the speaker forgets, the listener remembers’? — no, but that might not be the case.

I only knew later that Shinobu-chan’s first kin had resurrected not long ago, and she had a tough time facing this ‘failed work’.

By the looks of it, that sentence that frustrated me for over half a year, that made me ponder, that even made me prepare for a future comeback; that might really have been when Shinobu-chan was down, when she was trying to let it out, a careless remark.

Not off-the-cuff.

…It was still cruel though, and even then, that sentence hurting me was still a fact, but for some reason, I felt let down, the same kind of feeling one has when a curse is lifted casually, without effort.

Indeed.

One cannot retract past words, but to accuse them with ‘did you not say this back in the day’ or ‘you did not believe in that back then’ is to disallow any room for change — splitting out past selves as if they were someone different is obviously wrong, but to rely on one’s past self is also an act of stagnation.

Even for the one listening, those who forget will still forget.

To be deeply hurt by something so trifling, to give a random remark more weight than intended — really nuanced this is, communication.

'Ha.'

Shinobu-chan reclined and laughed heartily.

'Ha!

'Ha ha ha!

'Ha ha!

'Ha ha ha ha ha!'

Hold on, you laughing this loud would disturb the neighbours — people would think that a hikikomori is laughing aloud on her own.

'If some eejit were to utter something so asinine, bring them forth to me. I can guarantee. As one who hath lived six hundred years as the King of Aberrations, as the Iron-Blooded, Hot-Blooded, Cold-Blooded vampire, thou hast slaughtered me thousands of times, steppest down from thy divine throne, and gave up great power, determined to be human again, and hath lived merrily since then; how art thou merely happen to be cute? — thou art more than cute, and a hundredfold more irritable.'

'Irritable —'

'Mm. I know not if that is of beneficence, but for thyself, even if thou art reincarnatest a hundred times, thou shalt likely remain an irritable fellow.'

Shinobu-chan seems to be the one irritating me.

Surely that was not off-the-cuff either?

I am reminded of Oshino Meme-san's catchphrase, 'did something good happen?', as Shinobu-chan quietly slipped back into Tsukihi-chan's shadow.

This may not have been exactly reconciliation, but the days of conversing like this with Shinobu-chan have returned. Let us have a proper, long chat next time, and talk about manga.

Although I escaped out of fear this time, maybe someday I could also chat with Senjougahara-san — all thanks to Ougi-san (this was a dig at him), I already know where she lives and where the Tamikura Apartments are… I do not ask for her forgiveness, but I do want to know what Senjougahara-san is really like.

Why Senjougahara-san phoned the Araragi house landline back then was another mystery left unsolved.

After that, Tsukihi-chan slept until evening, and even had dinner before she went back, but Ononoki-chan seemed to have just missed her, and went in my room through the window, as usual.

Rather than say just missed, she purposefully missed her — reason one being, she cannot let Tsukihi-chan know that she is a moving doll; reason two simply being she detests Tsukihi-chan.

'Yay~ Peace peace~'

She seemed to have completely recovered from her injuries during that riot, including the hair — short hair really suited her too, though.

No matter, as long as she's fine.

By the way, I nervously visited the bookstore that got turned upside down thanks to my duel against myself the next day (typical of a criminal, returning to the crime scene), and it was open, business as usual.

I was completely speechless.

I thought I was dreaming, but I guess as Ononoki-chan said, this was the work of pros cleaning up.

Fascinatingly clean.

For the people who deal with all sorts of aberrations or oddities day to day, this panic caused by me was probably a mere tempest in a teacup — even so, I still think cleaning up was definitely not an easy job.

To think that my immaturity has caused so much trouble, I still felt somewhat guilty.

'No need to mind. For Gaen-san, this is an investment.'

An investment? I don't quite understand.

Anyway, with everything that had happened from last year up until now, I really should meet Gaen-san once and for all, shouldn't I.

'Mm, Naddie. I came here to talk to you about that. I bring you good news.'

Ononoki-chan said, as she plopped herself on the bed.

If I told her Tsukihi-chan was sat there just now, she would probably leap up; but that was not important, my attention has been drawn more towards her 'good news'.

What could it be?

A lost dog finally being found, something like that?

'Whilst cleaning up, I reported your adventures of the day, which piqued Gaen-san's curiosity towards your special ability — so I am here to ask for your help in a job.'

'J-job?'

Is this about aberrations?

Is this about me?

'Indeed. She said, looking at your results, she would like to see you helping her in her work regularly — such is the value she sees in you.'

'W-wait a second —'

I panicked. I'm embarrassed. What is she talking about?

Ultimately, this special ability was what created this monstrous mess — worst things worst, Divine Nadeko could have stolen that seat and become god again; I had not done anything worthy of praise.

I had even half given up on getting designated harmless.

Despite this, I seem to have gotten scouted out of nowhere…

'Don't misunderstand. Your ability to conjure shikigami was not what Gaen-san appreciated — it was your cool in face of trouble. Compared to someone who never

fails, Gaen-san places greater value on those who can kludge and claw back success from the brink of failure — which means your brief stint as a god was not for naught. In unusual, senseless situations that would put any person off, you faced them with bravery. To manage to retrieve four uncontrolled shikigami in a single day deserves far more commendation than those born with natural talent.'

Even with her paragraph, everything felt completely unreal.

I did not keep my cool.

All I did was panic all the way, didn't I? — yes, Ononoki-chan was injured through the middle of all this, so I, the outsider, had to step up into the frontlines… wait.

Wait, what?

'Could it be… that's why you let me take charge, Ononoki-chan?'

This was not the only part.

When discovering Speedo Nadeko, to deliberately not end things swiftly with the 'Unlimited Rulebook', but to let her swim longer and wait for the big fish — which led to Ononoki-chan's dismemberment — instead of handing over responsibility to me, might it be more accurate to say she handed those achievements to me?

As a professional, I would not have been surprised if Ononoki-chan had faster and sneakier ways of tidying things up, but she played support the whole time — was it to let

me be the one who retrieved all four shikigami?

Whilst she made it sound like the goal was to end with a harmless designation, had Ononoki-chan actually set her sights even further in the beginning?

From surveillance to protection — and even to investment. Not only was I designated harmless — I could be upgraded as someone to invest in.

I drew all sorts of things throughout this incident — but the one tracing it all would be Ononoki-chan.

Although losing control of four shikigami would not have been part of the equation, I felt like Ononoki-chan had been leading me here this whole time — but for what, exactly?

What else…

'Absolutely, Naddie. I am but a pro specialist, a severe, dry, businessman-like shikigami; someone working for the future of the industry, and making things easier for myself, hence my work in scouting prospective personnel. Now you know why I acted so close to someone like you, don't you?'

Yea, I know.

I know Ononoki-chan's bad at lying.

My parents ordered me to get a job once I finish middle school, but I am a talentless, reclusive, introverted, shy aspiring female manga artist with zero social skills; that was why the severe, dry, and businessman-like

Ononoki-chan thoughtfully and diligently worked to find me a job.

'You're not an adult yet, so Gaen-san probably wouldn't task you with something too difficult — of course, you can still keep working towards becoming a manga artist. Although there will be time constraints, consider them field trips; tour this incredible world, collecting and researching your material, not a bad deal, huh? It's not a steady job, but I can guarantee you'll have enough money to move out on your own.'

But Ononoki-chan never made things clear, she merely explained them as flatly as she usually did — whilst she seemed to imply that I should be the judge, having made such a detailed arrangement for me, there was no way I am messing up Ononoki-chan's charitable present.

My, my, this is actually happening.

This was not the ending I expected from being coiled by snakes last year. I had recklessly pursued those glass slippers out of my own fantasies, being told that I lowered my head often without ever noticing what I was standing on, but now it seems like I have my own pair of straw shoes: one foot a manga artist, one foot a specialist.

Would that be shoes on a snake too?

Afterword

As oft mentioned in this book, the danger of 'as long as one works, one's dreams will come true' is more than '"will" being an overstatement', but also that 'effort could not only lead to unfulfilled dreams, but a loss of reality'. The cons of 'effort' are also obvious. The path towards the future is also the path towards destruction, and possibilities of failure in challenges must be kept in mind. To give one's all, and end up with injury or missing one's big chance, that has happened so many times before; 'I studied all night for the test!' leading to 'sleeping during the test' is no rare occurrence. Overall, only in times such as these would the reminder of 'rest is also a part of hard work too' surface, making one think: you could've said something so important earlier! When reading biographies of the greats, one comes across lives of misfortune disproportionate to their greatness, but such misfortunes were probably the product of pushing their sacrifices and paying their prices elsewhere, as they were working towards that greatness. This kind of hard work is often held up as a virtue, yet when practicing it, one must first understand its demerits. A statement such as 'hard work will never betray you' would only be responded with a depressing thought such as 'yeah, your efforts may be kind only to you…'. Yet one must also not forget the cons

of *not* working hard. One must confirm if these are cons are manageable before setting out to work.

Anyway, this book is about a young girl coiled by hard work, or a young girl working to reveal her fangs; a tale whose main character is Sengoku Nadeko. It has been a long time since writing the *Monogatari* Series, so the happenings back in chapter four of *Bakemonogatari*, 'Nadeko Snake', were a distant memory; however, to have made such an entrance in the First Season, then to transform into what she became in the Second Season, the fact that I could still write Sengoku Nadeko as she appears this time makes me grateful towards being able to continue the *Monogatari* Series. When drafting this book, in addition to Sengoku Nadeko's new beginnings, I also had plans to write in Hachikuji Mayoi and Ononoki Yotsugi's new beginnings (traces of which were left in the finished book), but the five Sengoku Nadekos took up all of my time. Quite like her, actually. For one person to fill up an entire book, is this a first for the Off Season? With that, here is a novel composed of a thousand percent Sengoku, *Nademonogatari*, 'Chapter Zero: Nadeko Draw'. As for 'Mayoi Even' and 'Yotsugi No Side', those will have to wait another time.

This book features all sorts of Sengoku Nadekos, but VOFAN-san decided to draw her at her earliest on the cover, and her at her most recent in the insert. Thank you so much! And as for the remaining volume in Off Season, *Musubimonogatari* ('Tied Tale'), hmmm… from the title, could it be the tale of Araragi-kun and Senjougahara-san tying the knot?

NISIOISIN

Translator's Afterword

'Nadeko Draw' is first and foremost, in Kurt Vonnegut's terms, a 'Man in Hole' story, a story of redemption and growth. One may even go so far as to say *Nademonogatari* qualifies as a *Bildungsroman*, though I would only say it is the first half of one. All children have to grow up and work someday — preferably in that order. Everybody has their own path to adulthood, some more fantastical than others. Given that this afterword is at the very end, you can be the judge of what *Nademonogatari* is — a long-awaited developmental arc to a main character *à la* Hanekawa's *Nekomonogatari (Shiro)*, Nisio pandering to Nadeko fans, a[nother] challenge to Shaft (especially given 025), a *Bildungsroman*, half a *Bildungsroman*, redemption, or simply, 'Man in Hole'.

Of course, some may put forward the argument that Sengoku Nadeko is an irredeemable character (and she would probably agree with you), to which I shall borrow a maxim from *Hellsing*: humans can redeem themselves, monsters can't. Could this be one subconscious reason why our gamer girl decided to give up being god? Who knows? Probably. It is, after all, quite a manga-esque statement. Given this book, whether Nadeko would be a fan of dark

storylines such as *Hellsing* is left as an exercise for the reader.

That said, despite her protestations, 'Nadeko Draw' is not exactly saccharine either; the only part that can be described as such are Shinobu's doughnuts, and even then, they were accompanied with a bite of our main character's papery imitations. Come to think of it, Nadeko didn't eat any of them. She did have instant ramen, but those things are saltier than the Dead Sea. Nadeko may remind us that even fictional characters are living, breathing creatures, but there is a certain self-awareness, if not irony, of that statement appearing in a series where food breaks are… sparse, shall we say. Translating Yotsugi eating ice cream (in the summer, no less) is making me crave the stuff though. I should go out and buy some. Treating oneself is part of hard work, after all.

Speaking of, this is a loose translation, where not every word maps one-to-one with the original. Owing to fundamental linguistic and cultural differences, some things will be inevitably lost, some substituted, some added. Yotsugi's use of masculine 僕 (*boku*), wordplay subtlety, and Japanese's infrequent pronouns were definitely lost. Certain phrases, 'Naddie', and Fawning Nadeko's voice were definitely substitutions. Anti-Nadeko, meanwhile, hmm, I wonder… it is worth noting that voices (accents?) were pretty much the only thing that was spiced up, and from a different perspective, one can

consider it as preserving overall tone. Some things I also tried hard to keep, such as avoiding personal pronouns before Ougi's gender reveal in 002 or when discussing Mayoi in 019, or keeping 'I/me' vague throughout 027, such that when it is re-read, it still makes sense even with knowledge of the reveal. Translation is ultimately an art, and the last thing I wanted to do is to transform 'Nadeko Draw' into a boring read, which it was not intended to be. It does seem that Nadeko's arcs are where Nisio experiments the most with narration. Even as I proof the thing, this book hits hard, and I hope I have at least conveyed that well; it's the least a translator should do. This is a translation I did one hundred percent as a hobby. Thanks for reading and I hope you have enjoyed it.

It is worth noting that Sengoku's narrating voice is once again markedly different from all other narrators, even from herself in *Otorimonogatari*. Two points of note:

First, like *Otorimonogatari*, Sengoku's narration is filled with *teineigo* (polite honorifics), e.g. ending statements with *desu* instead of (e.g.) the informal *da*, or ending verbs with the polite *masu* instead of (e.g.) the dictionary *u*/*ru*. As with many things Japanese, much of it is inevitably lost in translation, further complicated by having to preserve small bits of suspense, and Sengoku being a middle school girl and not exactly

Shakespeare (and more to the point, neither am I).

Second, and completely different from *Otorimonogatari*, Nadeko speaks and narrates in the first person with 私 (*watashi*, first-person neuter singular, formal). She also no longer spells words out in kana (rendered as misspellings in the Vertical English release), or at least does not emphasise that she is spelling those words out. Considering what Nadeko tells us what being a deity did to her intellect (027), it could have been an *Otorimonogatari* exclusive (itself a *post hoc* narration). The resulting style of prose is generally drier, more formal and distant from the reader. Despite what I said about voices, this aspect of narration is something I tried in keeping, via e.g. lack of contractions and use of past tense.

These two, when combined, can unfortunately sometimes give the text a dry or repetitive impression. I offer my profuse apologies.

'Are you saying sorry just so you can end the conversation like Gentle Nadeko did (030)? Playing the victim, huh?'

Oh no, I've been found out…

'Stop doing this, you have to face reality someday too. Have you seriously not learnt *anything* from this book?'

Gotta go, toodles!